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Scottish Parliament

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[The Presiding Officer *opened the meeting at 14:30*]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Paul O’Kane, who is development officer at the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire.

Paul O’Kane (Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire): At the head of this new year, our thoughts naturally turn to resolutions—deciding to make changes in our lives and to do something differently in the year ahead.

I am reminded of the words of Robert Burns, which many of us will have sung only 10 days ago:

“And there’s a hand, my trusty fiere!
And gie’s a hand o’ thine!”

Burns creates a picture of reaching our hands out to others while also acknowledging our human need for help and support from those around us. I believe that volunteers offer that helping hand. They come from many different backgrounds and tell a variety of stories. It is important that they become visible in this great building and beyond.

In East Dunbartonshire, I meet volunteers every day who give their time and energy quietly and without show, because they want to improve their communities, strengthen our society and gain new skills and opportunities. I think of Ian Hector, a befriender from Lenzie, who told me that

“Volunteering as a Befriender provides an opportunity to talk, to listen, to share, to receive, to laugh and even sometimes to cry.”

Lauren Mullen, who is a 17-year-old volunteer from Turnbull high school in Bishopbriggs, always tells me that she has learned so much through volunteering. Lauren said:

“I want everyone to have the chance to learn as much as I have. All too often volunteering is seen as just something people do without thinking”,

but volunteers do think and their thoughts are of immense value to us all.

At the volunteer centre, we believe that everyone should be encouraged and enabled to volunteer. What would happen if we all woke up tomorrow and there were no volunteers—nobody to run the lunch club, no one to tutor those who have learning needs and no one to run social activity groups for those who have disabilities? What if there were no fundraisers for charity, no youth groups and nobody to foster animals that

are neglected? The list goes on, but the answer is always the same: the country would slow down, grind to a halt and begin to fall apart.

Volunteers are the thread that holds together the rich fabric of our society, coming from all walks of life, all cultures, and all abilities but with the same goal, which is to serve the common good and to change Scotland for the better.

Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire wishes Parliament well in its endeavours, and we look forward to your continued support over the months and years ahead as we give volunteers a voice and make the invisible visible.

Point of Order

14:33

Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Yesterday, Scotland's ministers at Westminster set out the United Kingdom Government's proposals for a fair, legal and decisive referendum in two statements: one to the House of Commons and one to the House of Lords. They took 47 questions from members of Parliament. In Scotland, the First Minister announced his date for the referendum, not to the Scottish Parliament but to Sky News—although Brian Taylor disputes that fact outside.

Given that the decision relates to what the First Minister called the biggest question for Scots in 300 years, and given that the Scottish Government is always concerned about the respect agenda, has the Scottish Government made a request to make a statement to this Parliament today? Is there any reason why you, Presiding Officer, would not be able to respond positively to such a request if it were made by the Scottish ministers?

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): In response to Willie Rennie's point of order, I have had no request from the Government for time to make a statement to Parliament today.

Educational Attainment of Looked-after Children

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-01667, in the name of Stewart Maxwell, on the Education and Culture Committee's inquiry into the educational attainment of looked-after children. I invite members who wish to take part in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

14:34

Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP): It is appropriate that we are holding this new style of committee debate at the outset of a new year. Unlike in typical committee debates, the Education and Culture Committee has not published a report or agreed recommendations. The purpose of this afternoon's debate is not to discuss at length the conclusions of an already-published report and to call on the Scottish Government to take a particular course of action. Rather, by seeking the views and experiences of all members, the committee invites the whole Parliament to inform its report, thereby building on the body of written and oral evidence that the committee has received during its inquiry.

Over many years there have been numerous attempts to get it right for looked-after children, in the shape of legislation, policy documents and initiatives to improve their educational attainment. However, we have to admit that, on the whole, we have not achieved what we set out to achieve. After 12 years of devolution, attainment levels for looked-after children remain significantly lower than attainment levels for other children. That begs the question: what is going wrong? What is, or is not, being done that leads to those poor figures? I will put it in starker terms: are we failing those children?

It was with those questions in mind that the Education and Culture Committee embarked on its inquiry last autumn. The inquiry has been conducted with an open mind, with members listening to the views of all those who have interests, from directors of education to teachers, and from trade unions to children's charities.

The committee visited Glasgow to hear from people who work day in and day out with looked-after children, and who are trying hard to make a difference and spur children on to greater things. Tragically, too often the committee has heard stories of good progress being made over a long period only for that progress to be set back by events that are outwith the control of the school, the social work department or, indeed, the children themselves. It is clear that the problems are

complex and multifaceted, and that they touch on areas that are beyond the scope of the inquiry. It is also clear that the questions that we are asking now have been asked for several years but have never properly been resolved.

I am under no illusions: it would be optimistic in the extreme to expect the committee to find a magic bullet. However, I hope that our report will provide an informed and considered contribution to the discussion that will cause all who are involved in the subject to reflect on how current practice is working and whether there are different ways of doing things.

The committee received written evidence from 32 groups and took oral evidence throughout November, which culminated in evidence from the then Minister for Children and Young People, Angela Constance. It is encouraging that many organisations suggested how improvements could be made. Five themes emerged from the evidence, which the committee has summarised for the purposes of the debate. I will briefly outline those key themes; I am sure that my committee colleagues will wish to develop them in their contributions. I will also ask various questions that have arisen from the inquiry and on which I would particularly welcome members' views.

The first theme that emerged was children's readiness to learn—namely, in terms of the support that needs to be in place before a child or young person can engage with school learning. It is clear that many children face barriers to attainment before they even enter the school environment. The biggest challenge is in improving the educational attainment of children who are looked after in their own homes, as their circumstances can often be the most chaotic. In oral evidence, Claire Burns from the centre for excellence for looked-after children in Scotland told the committee that it is challenging to work on early literacy if there are huge issues around substance misuse, domestic violence or parents' own literacy levels.

In written evidence, Fife Council argued that children are ready to learn when they are emotionally stable, have secure attachments to key care givers, are free of threat and risk, attend school regularly and consistently, and are supported by key role models who value education and actively support learning.

All that shows clearly the need for the earliest-possible intervention. I will not dwell for too long on early intervention; I know that the merits of that approach are well understood and well supported throughout Parliament. In this case, early intervention may in practice mean greater focus on children who are looked after at home. The latest statistics show that attainment levels for that group are failing to improve, with the consequence that

they are often being left behind by their peers. We must not allow that to continue.

Early intervention may therefore mean tougher and trickier decisions being taken earlier, and unacceptable conditions being spotted, challenged and responded to quickly. The committee would be interested to hear the views of other members on how we can ensure that looked-after children—particularly those who are looked after at home—are ready for school. How can better support be provided to parents to allow them to play a greater role in their child's education? Do difficult questions have to be asked about whether, for some children, the home environment is the most conducive place in which to learn?

In asking those questions and discussing the best approach to supporting children who are looked after at home, we must not lose sight of the need to get it right for every child, whatever that takes. Otherwise, we will fail children who have already been let down by those who are closest to them.

The second theme to emerge was support at school. The committee heard evidence about issues that can hamper a child's attainment at school. Some witnesses, such as CELCIS and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, argued that poor attendance is currently the main barrier to attainment, and stressed the particularly poor attendance levels of children who are looked after at home.

However, the Association of Directors of Social Work took a different view: it believes a high number of exclusions to be the core cause of poor educational attainment. It made the point that the gap in attendance rates between all looked-after children and other children is relatively small, whereas the difference in the number of exclusions is vast. It reiterated the link between school exclusion, criminality and young people ending up in prison.

If we are to improve the educational attainment of looked-after children, we must consider all barriers to improvement. Therefore, the committee would be interested in hearing members' views on the link between exclusion and attainment, on the role that attendance levels play and, crucially, on the best means of ensuring that looked-after children are always inspired in school and encouraged to reach their full potential. On that point, some witnesses suggested that there should be a wider focus on looked-after children's achievement, rather than simply their educational attainment. Members' thoughts on that point would also be appreciated.

The third theme to emerge was implementation of existing policy and legislation. As noted, there is a considerable amount of relevant policy,

legislation and guidance on looked-after children. Much of the evidence suggests that existing policy and legislation is right, but also that it is complex, can lack coherence and, therefore, can be difficult to implement. The word “patchy” was used again and again in respect of implementation.

In written evidence, Fife Council argued that it is time to rationalise and simplify the processes for implementing the getting it right for every child programme, additional support for learning legislation and care regulations at national level. The council stated that it has done what it can to simplify those processes at local level. The committee also received some evidence of perceived conflicts between GIRFEC and ASL. However, that view was not shared by Education Scotland, which made it clear that GIRFEC and ASL are supportive of each other if they are implemented properly. The committee would be interested to hear from members about how the relevant legislation is working in their localities and, specifically, about how GIRFEC and ASL sit together in practice.

Two children’s bills will come before the Parliament in the not-too-distant future. How can we be certain that they will improve on current practice and decision making, and not just create another complex layer of law? I would be interested to hear the Minister for Children and Young People’s response on that question.

Another recurring theme in evidence was the need for greater joined-up working between relevant agencies. It disappoints me somewhat that joint working is still sometimes talked about as an aspiration. The need for joined-up working to improve the educational attainment of looked-after children—or any social problem—is hardly a new or innovative idea. There are plenty of examples of effective joined-up working in many parts of Scotland, but it is not clear that it happens across the board. Evidence that the committee received suggests that there are still silos out there.

Many witnesses stressed the importance of good working relationships and stated that they are vital for effective joint working. Other witnesses pointed to the importance of leadership and staff training and of challenging existing attitudes and cultures. Still others, including the Educational Institute of Scotland and Education Scotland, stated that information technology issues make sharing of records among agencies and among local authorities difficult, although others did not agree with that. Historically, there have also been cultural issues with looked-after children being seen as social work departments’ problem.

I sincerely hope that the formal establishment of CELCIS will play a vital role in ensuring that effective joined-up working is practised throughout

Scotland. We must ensure that, as CELCIS states in its aims, we

“enable the various settings and systems working with looked after children to collaborate more closely, providing a whole systems approach to improving the outcomes of looked after children.”

Before publishing its report, the committee would welcome members’ input on that. What can be done to improve joined-up working? Is enough leadership being provided? Are there good local examples that are not widely known about? Those are crucial questions, to which we can surely bring a resolution.

The final theme to emerge in evidence was resources. The committee heard that lack of time, staff capacity and finance can act as barriers to joint working, the provision of learning support and the provision of stable placements. Evidence also suggests that capacity issues need to be considered. Examples include the significant shortage of available foster carers, and teachers in some schools having to deal with the specific needs of a number of looked-after children without compromising on the level of service that they provide to other children.

The committee also heard suggestions for changing resource allocations. For example, the EIS argued that schools’ staffing formulae ought to be weighted according to the number of looked-after children in each school, while ADSW suggested that each local authority should have a dedicated looked-after children teaching and health resource and that all residential units should have a link education officer or teacher. Unison stressed the importance of sufficient support being available to learning staff. In oral evidence, Children 1st advocated pooling local authority budgets and cited the example of the early years fund in South Ayrshire, which has generated positive education and health outcomes. Again, in formulating its conclusions, the committee will welcome all members’ views on all those interesting suggestions, in respect of the extent to which they are feasible in tough economic times and how they would work in practice in the communities that members represent.

Over the years, there have been many committee debates in this chamber, but I hope that this debate will be slightly different. The committee arrives in the chamber with no report or agenda, but simply with a body of evidence, some experience of the landscape and perhaps more questions now than it had when it started.

In concluding, I pay tribute to the many individuals across Scotland who strive day in and day out to improve looked-after children’s chances of achieving better results and thereby making it more likely that they will have a successful future.

Committee members were privileged to meet some of those tireless individuals on their visit to Glasgow in November. I pay tribute to their work.

As I said at the outset, this committee debate is unusual in that there is no report to debate. Instead, we wanted to do things a bit differently and get the views of members from all across the chamber after we had gathered evidence but before we started to write our report. I know that, in its many committees and its plenary meetings, the Parliament is beginning to think about the parliamentary reform agenda, so perhaps we have made a start that others might wish to follow.

On an issue that is as important as the educational attainment of looked-after children, I am delighted that all members, regardless of whether they are on the Education and Culture Committee, regardless of their party allegiance and regardless of which area of Scotland they represent, will have the opportunity to contribute to and influence the committee's final report. I look forward to hearing their contributions; committee members will listen carefully this afternoon. I hope that the debate will help to shape a robust, questioning, rigorous and informative report that will ultimately make a difference for looked-after children. Many of those children have already been failed. As corporate parents, let us not keep repeating that failure. Let us get it right for every looked-after child.

I move,

That the Parliament notes that the Education and Culture Committee is undertaking an inquiry into the educational attainment of looked-after children and that, in order to inform its final report, the committee would welcome the views of all members on the key themes that have emerged in evidence.

14:48

The Minister for Children and Young People (Aileen Campbell): I am delighted to take part in today's debate. I congratulate the convener and committee on their work so far and look forward to hearing their views in this important debate. I also welcome the new Labour education team, whom I met for the first time at yesterday's committee meeting.

As Minister for Children and Young People and as a corporate parent, I take the educational attainment of looked-after children very seriously. It is vital that we do all that we can to raise attainment and give these children the best possible start in life. This Government's ambition for our looked-after children is no different from our ambition for all children in Scotland—and is absolutely no different from my ambitions for my own son. We want children to be safe, healthy and loved, to enjoy their childhood, to achieve their full potential and to grow into responsible adults who

are capable of making positive contributions to our society.

We know that the educational attainment of our looked-after children and young people remains persistently poor. As the latest statistics show, looked-after children are absent or excluded from school more often and leave school earlier with fewer qualifications than those who are not looked after. They are also less likely to go on to education or employment after school. They are among Scotland's most vulnerable children, and the reasons why they do not reach their full potential are various, complex and interrelated. I have no doubt that the committee will have heard about some of the reasons during its inquiry.

Given that—as Stewart Maxwell noted—looked-after children and young people face additional barriers in accessing education, they require additional support from all who are involved in their care. Indeed, this Government and the previous Executive have worked to provide that support.

We will continue to ensure that the needs of looked-after children, young people and care leavers are embedded in wider work to improve outcomes, including getting it right for every child, curriculum for excellence, additional support for learning and the more choice, more chances strategy. We have strengthened the additional support for learning legislation; all looked-after children and young people are now automatically deemed to be in need of additional support at school unless the local authority determines specifically that they are not. Therefore, educational authorities and schools have a duty to assess each looked-after child or young person and to plan for and provide any additional support that they might need. We will continue to monitor how that legislation is being implemented.

The ministerial report, "Looked After Children and Young People: We Can and Must Do Better", which was published in January 2007, set out an action plan to improve the life outcomes of looked-after children and young people and recognised that education cannot be seen in isolation. That report and the accompanying training materials will now be updated in line with current legislation and with the getting it right for every child and young person policy.

The role of designated manager for looked-after children and young people in schools was established following the publication in 2001 of the report, "Learning with Care: The Education of Children Looked After Away from Home by Local Authorities". There being designated managers in educational establishments and the development of a reciprocal role in residential care establishments are central to the improvement of educational outcomes. Our looked-after children

and young people need someone in their school and in their home setting who understands their issues and supports their educational attainment. In September 2008, we published “Core tasks for Designated Managers in Educational and Residential Establishments in Scotland”, which clarifies the role and responsibilities of the people who undertake that important role. We will continue to monitor that work and are committed to strengthening the role of designated manager so that looked-after children get the support that they need.

To be able to learn, children need safe, stable, nurturing and permanent homes. That is why this Government is focusing on ensuring that looked-after children experience as few placements as possible. Our ambition is that children experience only one placement so that a child’s first placement is their only placement, from which they will return home or go on to permanence. Timescales for reaching decisions about permanence and adoption should be reduced.

This Government believes that, by properly embedding corporate parenting principles, we will be able to meet the needs and aspirations of each looked-after child. We have seen the role of corporate parent evolve and improve over the years, but more needs to be done. We are working in partnership with Who Cares? Scotland to deliver a national training programme so that those who care for looked-after children and young people are the best-possible substitute parents. We will build on the success of that programme by continuing to work with the corporate family to ensure that our looked-after children receive the support that they deserve.

In addition, children cannot be successful learners if their health needs are not identified and met. Local health services must take on a much more engaged role as corporate parents and provide health assessments within four weeks of a child’s coming into care, and must share information with councils and make access to services easier. We are totally committed to a partnership approach. Along with Stewart Maxwell and the rest of the committee, I want to see professional boundaries being overcome and everyone working together to drive forward improvements.

We know that, during the first three years of life, children’s brains complete 75 per cent of their growth and that, by the age of three, they have learned 50 per cent of their language skills. We know that what happens, or fails to happen, in the early years has a significant impact on an individual’s capacity for learning and attainment. We have a particular focus on the early years; we are committed to increasing the quality of early learning and childcare opportunities as part of our

wider drive to improve the future life chances of all Scotland’s children by giving them the best start in life. That is why I recently announced that we will fund additional early learning and childcare and work with parents for all looked-after two-year-olds. Over the next three years, we will make available £1.5 million a year to local authorities for their role as corporate parents.

It has been shown that children whose parents or carers talk and read to them and play with them have better language skills. Our play, talk, read campaigns encourage mums, dads, grandparents and carers to find simple fun ways to help their children’s brains to develop, and to give them the best chances in later life. We are also focusing on even earlier interventions so that children who are at risk of coming into care are provided with support in their family environment in order to allow them to go on to lead positive lives without coming into care.

Support for parents is key to improving outcomes for looked-after children and young people. We want parents to be positively and proactively involved in their children’s development. Parenting—in whatever shape or form—is the most important job that anyone can take on, and we all know that it comes with many challenges. That is why we are committed to developing a national parenting strategy. I want to highlight the importance and value of parenting in the context of the life chances of our children and young people, and I want the strategy to help to ensure that parents and families get the help that they need, when they need it.

The educational attainment of children who are looked after at home is particularly poor. The Scottish Government recognises the need to provide better support for that cohort of looked-after children, which the committee identified, and for their parents.

We also acknowledge that leaver destinations for looked-after young people and care leavers are significantly poorer than those of their peers, so we are prioritising support for that group to access learning and jobs.

We continue to improve throughcare and aftercare services for young people in the care system, so that they can effectively access learning and jobs.

Stewart Maxwell: During the committee’s visit to Glasgow, which I mentioned, we visited a unit in which some children are in long-term care. The unit also takes children on emergency placements, which can be disruptive and difficult for the children who are in long-term care—and for whom the unit is, in effect, their home—some of whom are trying to study for exams and get on. Does the

minister have a view on the mixing of long-term care places with emergency care placements?

Aileen Campbell: I take on board the point that Stewart Maxwell has made. We want to ensure that permanence is embedded in the system, in order to ensure that young people who go into care are in a stable and nurturing environment in which they can improve their attainment. I will be happy to continue the discussion after the debate.

The development of the throughcare and aftercare work plan is aimed at improving outcomes for looked-after children by strengthening the role of the corporate parent. We will do that by working in partnership with CELCIS, childcare practitioners, members of the corporate parenting family and young people.

In December, we announced a three-year £1.5 million package to support up to 1,000 young people who face the greatest barriers to employment. The initiative, which covers groups such as care leavers and young carers, will from April 2012, as part of the opportunities for all initiative, offer employer incentives and other tailored support to help young people into work. It will support all 16 to 19-year-olds who are not in work, education or training.

As corporate parents, we all have a duty to help to shape the lives of Scotland's looked-after children and young people. We have a duty to ensure that looked-after children and young people are supported to achieve the same levels of success as their peers achieve, and that when young people leave care they are able to lead fulfilling and healthy lives. Members of the Parliament can work together to achieve that. I thank the committee for its hard work and look forward to hearing members' views during the debate.

14:58

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank the convener and members of the Education and Culture Committee for bringing forward this debate on an important issue. I also thank the minister for welcoming Labour's education team to their new roles. We look forward to working with members across the Parliament on an issue on which there is a great deal of common ground. I was not a member of the committee until very recently, but during the Christmas period I spent time looking over the evidence that has been gathered, and I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate.

Educational attainment levels among looked-after children are a failure not of the children themselves, but of us as a society and as corporate parents, in our efforts to help and support those children and their families. The committee heard that only 0.5 per cent of children

who are looked after at home—fewer than one in 100—attained five or more standard grades in 2010. The inquiry is therefore vital. We need to ask ourselves why, despite a series of policy initiatives, pilots, projects and working groups, we continue to fail to meet our responsibilities as a society and as corporate parents. We must ask ourselves what more can be done to stop the trend continuing.

Many children's charities have rightly indicated that our aim for looked-after children must be not just to improve qualifications, but to improve outcomes and to harness talents and skills, as well as to offer other support to looked-after children in order to improve their life chances.

Many statistics will be mentioned in the debate, but we all know that looked-after children should be treated not as statistics, clients or customers but as children.

I want to use the debate to support enthusiastically the efforts that are being made to help our most vulnerable young people, to highlight examples of good work, and to suggest where we must do better.

We know that children's learning and wellbeing thrive in a stable and supportive home environment. The evidence backs that up, and that is why we must do all that we can to intervene early to help children and, where they cannot remain with their parents, to build security and stability for them by establishing permanent placements as soon as possible. We know the importance of a stable and nurturing environment, so we must do all that we can to support the dedication and commitment of kinship carers. We know from a recent Citizens Advice Scotland report that in two thirds of Scotland's local authorities kinship carers still do not receive the same payments as foster carers. Patchy support is little better than no support at all.

The crucial importance of family centres has been mentioned a number of times in evidence and briefings. They can play a vital role not only in preparing children for school but in promoting good parenting and offering parents support and advice. It is important that family centres are not designated in name only but are properly resourced with strong, flexible, suitably qualified and multidisciplinary staff groups that are equipped to offer an holistic approach to supporting children, families and communities, and are committed to working with others in an integrated way to help children and families.

Children cannot be expected to leave behind deprivation or the addictions of their parents, along with the emotional baggage that they might have, when they enter the school gates. It is clear that, despite the introduction of getting it right for every

child and other policy initiatives, there is still patchy implementation and a need for greater understanding of society's responsibilities and greater working together by agencies and professionals. As has been mentioned, there are number of barriers to that, and they need to be addressed.

One issue that has been raised is whether we can promote earlier action to train teaching staff to deal with looked-after children so that they are fully prepared to provide help and support when they take up posts. Teachers need to know about the difficulties and challenges that those children face, and how they can work with other agencies to support them. It appears that some of the modules that support such work are optional. Work with universities to improve awareness in that area could greatly assist at little extra cost.

My final point is on resources; it has been made by a number of charities and other organisations, and I know that the committee considered it during its inquiry. I do not say this in a partisan way, but we need to ensure that any progress that has been made is not undermined by the wider budget cuts that we are experiencing, which could have a disproportionate effect on looked-after children. For example, we have 4,000 fewer teachers since 2007. If every minute of teachers' time is being squeezed and they have larger class sizes, the teachers to whom I have spoken tell me that, regrettably, it is inevitable that less personalised attention will be given to looked-after children who have additional support needs. We must also fully examine the impact of staff reductions, as the number of behaviour support staff fell from 220 in 2007 to 190 in 2011 and the number of school-home link staff fell from 147 in 2007 to 113 to 2011.

Aileen Campbell: Those figures have been updated, and there has been a slight increase in behaviour support staff.

Neil Bibby: Perhaps the minister will confirm later in the debate whether the numbers are still down on the 2007 figures or whether there has been a slight increase.

We must also examine the impact of cuts in further education. Some 33 per cent of looked-after children go into further education and only 1 per cent into higher education. The Association of Directors of Social Work and the National Union of Students Scotland, among others, have made important points about the later development of looked-after children and the fact that their educational attainment significantly improves at the age of 18. That is due partly to the important work that further education institutions do with looked-after children. It would be concerning if regionalisation led to a reduction in the courses that looked-after children can access at their local

colleges. Given that many looked-after children have attendance issues, the importance of locally available courses cannot be overstated.

A significant number of other points could be made about improving the life chances of looked-after children. I hope and anticipate that many members will raise those points in the rest of the debate and the inquiry so that we live up to our responsibility as a society and as corporate parents.

15:04

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, welcome Labour's new education team. It is a formidable team, if I may say so. I trust that all education debates will be equally as consensual as today's.

In my past life, I lectured on economics in further and higher education. With that background, I am very pleased to speak in this debate, and my colleague Liz Smith will sum up later on behalf of the committee. In my two decades as a lecturer, my students came from all backgrounds and were of all ages, and many of them had life experiences that were not so good. However, further education in particular has the enviable reputation of giving many people a second chance. That is why Conservatives would pilot the concept of second-chance centres for pupils who are excluded from school, which would be separate from the school environment and would help to refocus young people's lives.

I am not sure whether this is the first time that we have had a debate following a committee inquiry but prior to the writing of the committee report, but it is certainly the first time that I have been involved in such a debate. I welcome this approach and I commend all members of the Education and Culture Committee for their work on and commitment to the issue.

The evidence and briefings for the debate make pretty depressing reading. It would be depressing enough to look at today's poor statistics and outcomes relating to looked-after children, but the fact that, despite the many actions that have been taken, they have barely improved since devolution should concern us all.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing for the committee in October highlights the actions that have been taken, as Stewart Maxwell said. They include the introduction and implementation of legislation, Audit Scotland reports, priority funding, ministerial working groups, inspection reports prioritising looked-after children, pilots, guidance and so on in every year of the Parliament since 1999, yet there has been no significant improvement. Therefore, whatever the Education and Culture Committee

recommends is unlikely to be enough unless measures are put in place to audit and monitor performance and outcomes and unless there is full co-operation, commitment and consistency of approach across local authorities. In addition, whatever the committee recommends must have the full co-operation and support of the ministerial team. That is undoubtedly how we achieve success in Scotland.

My second point relates to integrated working. We should ensure that emphasis is placed on joined-up working between education and social work departments that are under the same roof. For years, there have been problems relating to care of the elderly because of the lack of partnership working between health and social work. However, that should not be a problem and it should not be allowed to be a problem in two departments in the same council.

I was impressed when I read in the SPICe briefing about the improvements to care plans, corporate parenting, GIRFEC and more robust local authority statistical returns. However, the next paragraph in the briefing stated:

“Few care plans ... took a long term view of the needs of the child ... care plans do not focus ... on outcomes ... There were fewer support staff in schools in 2010 than in 2007 ... Schools are not always sufficiently aware of relevant training materials”.

It was also said that

“it was rare to find a plan that linked actions to anticipated outcomes.”

In evidence to the committee, witnesses have said that GIRFEC is not being implemented consistently or extensively enough across local authorities. However, on that issue, I commend Highland Council, which seems to have led the way on many aspects of GIRFEC in Scotland.

Although 94 per cent of looked-after children had a care plan in 2009-10, that did not lead to the care, support and educational attainment that had been hoped for. If I can be less diplomatic, it could be said that the care plan was not worth the paper that it was written on.

That brings me to the historic concordat that was the basis of single outcome agreements, with local authorities focusing spending on achieving agreed outcomes with the Scottish Government. The promised transparency has certainly not led to improved outcomes for looked-after children. Half of 1 per cent of children looked after at home achieve five or more qualifications, compared with 56 per cent of all leavers who do so. That has to be deeply concerning, given that almost 16,000 children are looked after in various settings in Scotland.

The regulations for looked-after children state that the child's care plan

“must include arrangements concerning details of any services to be provided to meet the care, education and health needs of the child.”

However, I am not clear about who is responsible for ensuring that that happens. Why are so many looked-after children falling through the net?

I commend Jack McConnell, Cathy Jamieson and Peter Peacock for the action that they took in relation to looked-after children and I commend the initiatives that have been taken by education ministers in this Government. However, I must say that, although we in the Parliament pass legislation, along with guidance and regulations, I am not sure what we do to ensure that local government fulfils its responsibility to implement all that.

Unless there is a more robust and consistent approach to the implementation and enforcement of actions that are recommended by the Parliament, future approaches will also not work, and we could be debating the failure of our approach to looked-after children in a decade's time.

15:11

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I speak today as a member of the Education and Culture Committee. In November, as a result of our inquiry into looked-after children—in particular, some of the quite dispiriting evidence that the committee heard in the course of it—I asked the Cabinet Secretary for Justice whether he could tell me what proportion of prisoners who are currently held in Scottish jails were previously classified as looked-after children. Up-to-date figures were not available at that point, but I was pleased to hear from Mr MacAskill that, in 2011, for the first time, prisoners had been asked a question along those lines as part of the Scottish prison survey. That is information that we must have, because there is a recognition that detrimental experiences early in life can have devastating effects on the path that that life takes.

I am pleased to tell the chamber that the information is now available, although the picture that it paints is a matter of great concern and cost—human as well as financial—to society.

I have a letter from Mr John Ewing, the chief executive of the Scottish Prison Service, in which he informs me that, last year, 28 per cent of prisoners in Scotland defined themselves as having been in care as a child. That is almost one in three. To translate that percentage into flesh and blood, 28 per cent of the 8,140 prisoners who were in custody last year amounts to 2,779 prisoners.

It costs £32,146 to keep a person in prison for a year in Scotland. Therefore, I estimate that the bill

for prisoners who were looked after as children comes to £73.2 million. What a terrible waste, not just of money but of human potential.

I am afraid that that is likely to be an underestimate because the question that was asked was whether prisoners had been in care as children as opposed to being under some sort of supervision order at home. That is significant because, as Mr Maxwell and others have said, the Education and Culture Committee found that the lowest-achieving children were those who remained with their families, as opposed to those who were with foster parents or in residential care. Children who stayed at home were far more likely to pay truant from school—with parental consent or, more often, because of parental indifference. Such children are more likely to be left to wander the streets, leaving them vulnerable to becoming involved in substance abuse, gangs and criminal behaviour.

As we know, once offending behaviour starts, it becomes difficult to break the cycle. Once a young person enters the prison system, their chances of becoming a repeat offender escalate. We all agree that we need to find ways of preventing offending in the first place. Tackling the issue of looked-after children seems a good place to start. I therefore welcome the efforts of the Government and its predecessor in this area. I am particularly impressed with the evidence that was given to us by CELCIS. Having a centre of excellence for looked-after children is a great step forward. As the minister said, having a designated manager in schools is an important advance, as is the national parenting strategy.

I particularly welcome the emphasis on fewer placements and more permanence in placing children in care. However, given all the evidence that the committee received, I am inclined to agree with Stewart Maxwell that tougher and trickier decisions might need to be made for children who are looked after at home. That may mean intervening earlier to remove children from damaging home environments, and sometimes it may mean intervening before the child has been born. Even the best national parenting strategy in the world and the most outstanding support are sometimes not enough for those children. In that regard, I welcome the Government's commitment to increasing the number of people coming forward as foster parents.

What struck me during the committee's inquiry was—as other members have mentioned—the amount of legislation and guidelines that have been passed and issued by the Parliament, stretching right back to its inception. However, despite the huge amount of detailed material, it seemed to the committee that communication between agencies still requires improvement, and

the way in which guidelines are followed in schools and in education and social work departments can be patchy.

These are Scotland's children and, as the minister said, we as MSPs are responsible for them as corporate parents. However, we should be wary of trying to tackle administrative failings by piling on more administration, policy guidelines and instructions from on high.

At the risk of sounding facetious, I could not help thinking during the inquiry that perhaps less would be more. If there was less emphasis on rules, guidelines, legislation and paperwork, and if more people took responsibility for the fate of individual children, we all might make more progress.

I am pleased to report that, in our fieldwork, we saw evidence of adults taking responsibility in that way. I was very impressed by one guidance teacher in a large secondary school in Glasgow who took a personal interest in the children in her institution. On one occasion, she had gone to a child's house to ensure that they attended an interview for an important college place, because she knew that nobody else would do it and nobody else cared.

We should bear in mind that this debate is not only about children. Inside every adult, there is a child, and inside far too many adults, there is a child who has been failed.

15:17

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate, particularly as I am a Glasgow MSP. Glasgow has around 10 per cent of Scotland's children and young people, but it has more than 20 per cent of Scotland's looked-after children, which I understand is the highest proportion of any area in the country. Glasgow therefore has a particular interest in the issue, but the debate is important and timely for every member in the chamber, wherever they come from in Scotland.

I declare an interest as a member of Glasgow City Council. In Glasgow, the proportion of looked-after children who achieve five or more Scottish credit and qualifications framework awards at level 4 or above is 24 per cent, in comparison with 72 per cent of children who are not looked after.

I welcome the progress that the Scottish Government and previous Scottish Governments have made in having care plans produced for nearly all looked-after children and in having such children included in the strategic priorities of most local authorities. However, more needs to be done. The trend during the past few years has been an improvement in attainment and exclusion

levels, but looked-after children still lag too far behind on those measures.

Further progress is at risk of being stunted if cuts continue to be made to support staff in our schools. Scotland has lost 115 support staff from its schools in the past year, and an astonishing 1,452 support staff from its secondary schools in the same period. Perhaps the minister will tell us in summing up how we will improve outcomes with 1,600 fewer support staff.

Recommendation 6 in the recent European and External Relations Committee report from session 3 states that the committee is concerned about the

“poor linguistic performance of the Scottish population”

and refers to people having two native languages and language skills. A case in point is the facility for Punjabi in our schools. At the moment, there is no provision for Punjabi speakers in our schools. We do not allow them to use Punjabi in examinations because the Scottish Qualifications Authority claims that there are not sufficient Punjabi speakers and that there is insufficient demand for the language. However, after English, Punjabi is the most widely spoken language in Scotland. I do not know how the SQA has come to that conclusion and I ask the minister to comment on that. I am hopeful that the minister will take steps to address the issue for the Punjabi-speaking community. We go on about encouraging languages, yet we fail our community in that way.

In spite of an increase in assistance for looked-after children, progress is still too slow and is in danger of grinding to a halt because of budgetary constraints. I welcome the Education and Culture Committee’s inquiry and I look forward to hearing what the minister has to say about addressing the issues.

Education is very important and we tend to put pressure on agencies to provide support for our young people, but we are perhaps not supporting the parents. A lot of parents—in particular, single parents—find it very difficult to bring up children and to support them in their education. There must be some provision for them, and we must support our schools in delivering that provision, as there does not seem to be any other window of opportunity. Young parents engage with schools more readily and regularly. Therefore, I ask the minister whether she can try to find some support to enable schools to provide additional support for single parents and parents who are experiencing difficulties, so that we give those children a fair opportunity in life.

15:22

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members’ interests, as I am a member of Aberdeen City Council, which will inevitably come up in the debate. I thank the committee for its inquiry and I welcome the innovation of having the debate before the report is written. In his opening remarks, the convener said that he was keen to hear about where things work. I hope that he will get a feel for some of the positives in my constituency today.

I will talk first about positive destinations rather than attainment. In Aberdeen, we have a reasonable amount of success in that regard. The council works closely with schools, 16-plus coordinators, Skills Development Scotland, voluntary projects and further education colleges to ensure that looked-after young people who are leaving schools are offered a positive destination. The council is delivering the family firm approach whereby businesses offer supported placements for young people who are leaving care. The council has promoted the approach with a number of private sector partners, and several council directorates have successfully offered internships and apprenticeships for eligible young people who are leaving care. One colleague in Aberdeen said that such positive discrimination is wrong, but I argue that, if a member of our own family were leaving school, we would do everything possible to get that young person into work and would pull out all the stops to do so. I do not see why we should do anything different for our young folk who have been looked after.

In Aberdeen, 71 per cent of children and young people who were looked after by the city and who left school during 2009-10 were in a positive destination at the time of the follow-up destination survey. That compares to a figure of 44 per cent nationally. The city is ranked first among comparable authorities, with the highest number of folk in a positive destination. Lessons can be learned from Aberdeen about achieving those positive results. Some folk will say that the fact that the economic outlook in Aberdeen is better than it is elsewhere is a factor. I have no doubt that that is the case, but I still think that there are lessons to be learned. Nevertheless, we should not rest on our laurels, because the destinations survey showed that 86.9 per cent of kids who were not looked after were in positive destinations. That is 15.9 per cent higher than the figure for looked-after children, so there is still a lot to do.

Mr Maxwell also talked about joined-up working and the fact that it is sometimes lacking in certain places. In Aberdeen, all primary, secondary and special schools have a designated manager who is responsible for monitoring the position of

looked-after children and identifying their additional support needs at school. The monitoring of looked-after children is a key component of the council's quality improvement framework. The local authority also has a dedicated looked-after children teacher, who is responsible for overseeing and co-ordinating education provision for children in its own children's unit. The teacher offers guidance and support to residential childcare workers, field social workers and young people, and also advocates on their behalf.

The most innovative thing that is going on in Aberdeen is an initiative between the council and Barnardo's Scotland. The project is called Strive and is making major moves forward. It is an innovative new programme, which is designed by Barnardo's to help to improve the educational outcome of looked-after young people by providing them with opportunities to experience success, build their confidence and increase their motivation. The project is aimed at children between the ages of 11 and 16 who are looked after at home or away from home and who are struggling with mainstream school provision in terms of attainment and attendance or who are at risk of exclusion. The young people concerned are engaged in learning and in improving their educational attainment. The project stems the flow of looked-after young people going to negative destinations and it takes a holistic approach.

The service offers coaching out of school hours, which seeks to engage young people in inspirational, fun and structured individual and group activities to promote learning and achievement. It includes a £500 learning fund for each young person, which adds freedom and focus to the coaching relationship and gives the relationship resources to make change happen. There are also one-to-one sessions with a specific school focus, which connect success and motivation from out-of-school-hours learning to school performance. The project is in its early stages and an analysis of how well it goes will be conducted. I could talk about it for some time, but I am coming to the end of my time.

I hope that the committee and the minister will look at what Strive has done thus far and at what I think it can do to improve the educational attainment levels of our looked-after children. If it is shown to be a success, which I am sure it will be, I hope that it can be rolled out across the country.

15:28

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): When I gave evidence to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee about how we might change our procedures in the Parliament, I posited

cross-committee subject debates without a motion to allow interaction between committee members on evidence that they had received. The debate comes pretty close to that and I welcome it.

I will focus on evidence that my colleague Joan McAlpine referred to about looked-after children finding themselves disproportionately in the criminal justice system. I will exclude from that the issue of children's panels.

Parliament has heard that 28 per cent of the prison population indicated that they had been in care during their upbringing. Of those, a fifth had been in care at the age of 16. Further statistics show that three quarters of children who are in residential care by their 16th birthday will have a criminal conviction by the age of 22. Further, 45 per cent—almost half—of all young people who are in young offenders institutions have been in residential care at some point in their lives. It is not rocket science to see that we are not sorting the situation out to any degree.

That was brought home to me when the Justice Committee split into three groups to look into the way in which we deal with women offenders. Two colleagues and I went to the 218 project in Glasgow. That project is for women who have been in and out of Cornton Vale and who have had alcohol rather than drug problems, which was quite surprising. As they spoke to us, it turned out that many of them had been in care and that many of their children were in care. There was a vicious cycle of people who had been in care as children going to prison and then their children going into care.

How do we start to sort that out? I do not know; it is not simple. However, if 513 children who are defined as looked after left care in 2010, it does not take a lot to work out how many of those will end up in the criminal justice system if we do not do anything.

Kevin Stewart referred to a project in his constituency. In the Borders, we have Peebles Youth Trust. When it is seen that a child in primary 6 in a Peebles high school feeder school is beginning to become disconnected, the trust is invited in before the child gets into trouble. The trust has 22 mentors, who are each allocated to a child, their family or carer and their siblings, and who work alongside those families and the child's teachers. The cost of that project is £30,000, which is less than the cost of keeping one prisoner in Cornton Vale or anywhere else for a year. It is money well and successfully spent. That is an example of early intervention on the ground and I am sure that other colleagues have examples from their constituencies.

I note that the Government has responded to the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration

report and set up a new centre for excellence for looked-after children, to which someone has referred already. I do not want to hit things, but I do not know anything about the place. I hope that it will work seriously with academics, criminologists and people in the criminal justice system, and speak to the women from the 218 project whom we met. We need to do practical things. We do not need more guidance, rules or legislation. We need practical things such as that wee project in the Borders or other, perhaps better, projects that other members can talk about. We need to see where we can intervene and break the cycle so that we are not looking at 45 per cent of the children who are in care getting criminal convictions by the time they are in their early 20s.

15:32

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I start by congratulating the minister and Labour's front-bench team on their new responsibilities.

Like others, I welcome the opportunity for members across the Parliament to contribute to the committee's on-going inquiry, which has reinforced my profound respect for all those who work in the field. The convener has set out the background to the inquiry well and, given this afternoon's time constraints, I do not intend to repeat much of what he and other members have said. However, a few points bear re-emphasising.

This area of policy has proved to be stubbornly resistant to the well-intentioned interventions of successive Governments. Joan McAlpine's mantra of "less is more" has its attractions at this stage.

Improvements have been achieved for certain groups of looked-after children, but the outcomes for too many, particularly those who are looked after at home, fall frighteningly short of what is acceptable. Ninety per cent of looked-after children leave school aged 16 or under, and only 1 per cent go on to higher education. Far fewer than half find themselves in employment, education or training six months after leaving school.

As Children in Scotland and other organisations argue, there is no inherent inevitability to those alarming disparities of outcome. For example, Barnardo's points to evidence that shows the benefits to children of being in stable foster homes rather than being subjected to multiple placements, often over a short period of time. As we all know, permanence is critical to a child's sense of wellbeing and self-confidence and, in turn, to their life chances. I welcome the minister's assurances this afternoon, but a recent SCRA report confirmed that there are still too many delays in the process, from the identification of risk to the point of adoption or other form of

permanence. As the committee heard, timeframes appear much longer to the children themselves, and research shows that every year of delay in the system reduces by 20 per cent the chances of a child being adopted.

Addressing that has to be a priority not just for the Government, but for local authorities. Greater focus is also needed on recruiting and supporting more foster and adoptive parents, particularly those who are capable of taking on such roles with children who display more complex needs.

Such complexity of needs is not unusual, of course. Barnardo's has highlighted the point that there are very often multiple barriers to learning. Many looked-after children have chaotic lifestyles and are forced to cope with a range of issues, including domestic violence, alcohol or substance misuse and physical or even sexual abuse. It has been estimated that 50 per cent of looked-after children have mental health problems, which is five times the average for all children. That can be a cause or even a consequence of becoming looked after, but it illustrates the complexity involved in tackling the issues and the need, as Barnardo's has said, for a holistic approach to improving educational outcomes.

That was reinforced for me by the committee's visit to Glasgow and discussion with teaching and social work staff at Oakwood primary school. The profile of one class of eight-year-olds provided heart-wrenching evidence of the chaotic lifestyles that most had to contend with, the range of complex needs that exists, and the different types of support that are in place. However, that and the level of vulnerability were not an accurate guide to whether a child was looked after, although that status varies over time, which in turn presents further problems for measuring attainment. During our visit to Oakwood primary school the benefits of a joined-up approach between education and social work staff were demonstrated. That approach is a theme of the committee's inquiry and in colleagues' comments, and most witnesses have suggested that it can and must be improved.

I must mention the Place2B initiative that we witnessed in St Benedict's primary school, which is a neighbouring Easterhouse primary school. The scheme, which is staffed by trained volunteers who operate in the school, gives children the chance to explore their problems through talking and creative work and play. In more serious cases, parents and carers are encouraged to become involved. By helping all pupils to deal with feelings of sadness, fear and anger, the initiative leaves them more able to learn and less inclined to be disruptive in class. That integrated approach is delivering clear benefits not just for the children, but for parents, carers and staff—and, indeed, the wider community. Our two young tour guides for

the day at St Benedict's primary school were staunch advocates of the initiative, and staff at Oakwood could not disguise their impatience for it to be rolled out more widely. I hope that that will happen.

In the time that I have left, I want to touch on two issues: the early years and aspirations. On the former, Children in Scotland has provided an excellent briefing that reinforces the importance of the pre-birth to three-year-old period in determining educational and wider attainment. What we do or do not do in that period can have a dramatic influence on a child's life chances, and Children in Scotland is absolutely right to urge us to continue to focus on that area. That will require funding. I repeat my welcome for the additional resources that are being made available, but I was struck by Children in Scotland's claim in its briefing that

"most of the effort and investment intended to improve educational outcomes ... continues to be ... focused on the secondary school age group."

Ministers may want to investigate that.

It is about more than funding, of course. A considerable onus rests on, for example, the planned parenting strategy helping to deliver effective support as well as the removal of existing barriers to the collaborative working to which I referred earlier.

I want to make a final brief point that relates to the aspirations and ambitions of looked-after children and young people. Looking at attainment in its broadest sense is essential, but part of the key to improving educational outcomes is surely raising aspiration levels. Numerous witnesses have highlighted the problems of self-doubt and stigmatisation and the lack of encouragement that too many looked-after children face, but despite that, 33 per cent go on to further education. As the NUS has rightly suggested, that shows the vital role that colleges play in widening access to education and offering a second chance to those who need it. In that context, the deep cuts proposed for college budgets are a serious concern. I hope that what has been said will add further force to the calls for a rethink before the budget is finally approved.

The answers that we seek to the long-standing problem of the educational attainment of looked-after children are, as Joan McAlpine said, unlikely to be found in further legislation. Less patchy implementation, better collaboration, earlier intervention and more effective use of resources appear to be the key. However, as the convener of the committee observed during a fraught evidence session and again today, we have been saying that for years, so why have those things not happened? Why indeed.

I hope that the inquiry helps as part of a process of finally getting things right for every looked-after child in the way that we all wish to see. In the meantime, I support the motion and look forward to further contributions from colleagues.

15:39

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands)

(SNP): I, too, am a member of the Education and Culture Committee. I thank the convener for his succinct and comprehensive overview of the current situation as presented to the committee by those who have given evidence. The issue is the most important one and deserves all members' ideas and input. We must share positive and negative experiences and we need a real desire to do our best for Scotland's looked-after children.

Members often speak about particular issues in their areas to do with, for example, harbours, city-centre congestion, wild land or urban renewal. Some of those issues resonate with other members whose areas have similar issues, but the issue of children who are looked after at home, in kinship or residential care or with foster parents is common to every constituency. I argue that it is not only the most important issue, but one that is pertinent to every member.

Tomorrow, we will have a debate entitled "Scotland's Future", but today's debate could also have been called that. For various reasons, the number of looked-after children is growing and the current economic situation might result in even larger numbers of children coming into that category. Other budgets and agencies address some of the causes, but it is vital that we consider the serious symptoms that lead to our failing our children. A high proportion of the children whom we fail become adults who fail. Members have cited the statistics that show the high percentage of those who are in young offenders institutions and prisons who were looked-after children.

Everyone who is concerned about the issue has said that investment in the early years is crucial. The Government recognises that. It is important that the committee and Parliament are kept abreast of developments, so I was pleased to hear the minister talk about regular monitoring. It makes sense that the better nurtured, nourished, encouraged and loved a child is in the early years, the better able he or she will be to tackle confidently his or her life of discovery and learning thereafter.

The issue is important for Scotland, too, because it is truly a reflection of our society. Nelson Mandela said:

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

The Parliament will always take time to celebrate our success. We regularly have motions that celebrate the achievement of children, schools or classes or of sports and arts groups, but we would do well to monitor our looked-after children with almost as much regularity.

The convener highlighted the challenges. All those who are involved, including health workers, nurses, housing officers, children and parents, carers, teachers, social workers, the police and other professionals must work together to identify the support and help that are needed. That sounds awesome. We heard in evidence just how difficult it is for the professionals to come together. We can imagine that it is not an easy task, but it is nonetheless the most important task that we face. What is the challenge for those professionals and what are the frustrations and the barriers to success? Who measures what success looks like? It is important that we listen to our professional advisers on that.

A fundamental issue must be the exceptionally high number of absences and exclusions from school among looked-after children compared with the figure for other children. We cannot ignore that in considering the educational attainment of looked-after children. Figures from the Scottish Parliament information centre show that the overall exclusion rate of looked-after children in 2009-10 was 365 per 1,000, whereas for all schoolchildren it was 45 per 1,000. That must be unacceptable and it relates directly to the lack of achievement. If someone is not in school, the chances are that they will not learn as well or that their education will suffer.

There is anxiety that the figures are even worse than that—I understand that some cases are not included in the figures. It is important for the committee to note that preliminary absences are not taken into account when the final figures are counted up. That is shocking and means that the situation is even worse.

I guess that the main point that I want to make is that not all education happens in school. Peer groups and the family, however they manifest themselves, are as much of an educational influence as teachers are, and they too need to understand their role in an educational context.

Across Scotland, we have some spectacularly good extra-curricular activities that have given children a particular and special opportunity to achieve new skills. Research has shown and books have been written about how practical and creative skills result in greater concentration, a greater sense of satisfaction and greater confidence in academic study. Those options are not always available to the looked-after child, perhaps because the parent or guardian does not

have an interest in or an instinct with regard to the child's ability.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): You must close, please.

Jean Urquhart: One of the things that we might do is look carefully at the good examples to which children may more easily relate and seriously have advantage.

Presiding Officer, I welcome the debate. Thank you for the extra time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I inform the chamber that there is a minor fault with the microphones. When members have concluded their speeches, I ask them please to turn off their microphones by pressing the request-to-speak buttons.

15:46

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): In his speech, Stewart Maxwell was hopeful that during this debate we would not just go over a lot of the information and evidence that are already before the committee. I appreciate that members are rightly emphasising many of the concerning statistics in relation to the subject that is before us this afternoon.

I take the opportunity to say how highly we regard the commitment and dedication of our teachers, foster carers, kinship carers and other people who look after our looked-after children within our community.

Many members have stated that the area is complex, and indeed it is. It was Neil Bibby who said that children are not statistics but children. That is right: they are children—children with specific needs, who require love, attention and care and our best effort to resolve the problems that they face in our society.

The problem is not new, and it is one that attempts have been made to tackle through legislation, policy and procedure. We must move away from the excuses. We have heard in evidence and briefings from the ADSW and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland various reasons why we are failing our children and why they do not attain to the same level as other children in schools. Recognising that is only part of the problem; trying to blame different organisations for not working together is not the solution.

A multidisciplinary approach is the only way forward. We have to get over working in silos and we have to get it right for every child. The GIRFEC approach properly attempts to resolve the problem. We must encourage our local authorities, our education and social work departments and

our third sector to work together for the sake of our children and the future.

As I said, the issue is complex, and I am sure that Stewart Maxwell and the rest of the committee want to hear answers. I do not have the answers—I am not sure that anyone else in the Parliament has. There is no single answer. It is a matter of trying to work together to recognise the problem, which we have done.

I congratulate Kevin Stewart on coming to the debate with a spring in his step for 2012. That is what I expect from him: to come forward with a positive submission from Aberdeen city, in this case on the work of Barnardo's, which is perhaps the model that we are looking for. It is about mentoring, nurturing and offering support; removing stigma and ensuring that children are given the opportunity for love, attention and dedication; providing children with support, whether from an individual or a group; and moving the agenda forward, which is what Parliament should be doing and what the Education and Culture Committee has done.

At the beginning of a new year, many of us set out resolutions. Our resolution for looked-after children should be that they receive better, healthier and much more positive intervention from Parliament and Government.

15:50

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): I begin by offering all members my best wishes for the new year. I hope that it brings everyone good health and happiness.

I am glad to speak in the debate, which is in some senses about ensuring the health and happiness of looked-after children through their educational attainment. As a former care manager for children and families in Glasgow's social work department, as a member of the Scottish Parliament, as a corporate parent with Glasgow City Council—as a Glasgow councillor—and of course as a mother of three children, providing education services that deliver for and meet the needs of all Scotland's children is extremely important for me.

However, the reality is that in our country there are unacceptable levels of youth unemployment, which is expected to be higher among looked-after young people. When we look at the statistics for Scotland's looked-after children, we see lower levels of educational attainment than the national average. The number of school exclusions, which can lead to a greater chance of unemployment for those young people once they leave school, is higher.

Moreover, as the Education and Culture Committee's inquiry has heard, there are serious concerns about the identification in schools of the individual support needs of looked-after children. The Scottish Government must take note of that concern, especially given that the number of support staff in schools decreased after the first three years that it was in power. However, we should address more than just the issue of support staff; lessons must be learned from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education reports, which have suggested that schools are not even always aware of the relevant and specifically designed training materials for looked-after children.

There are positive examples of engagement that can be drawn upon. Other members have spoken about their areas and I will speak about mine. In Glasgow, specific initiatives such as CLASS—the community learning and support service—are making a difference to the lives of vulnerable young people. CLASS provides care and education for young people aged between 14 and 16 who have additional support needs arising from family circumstances and social and emotional factors.

The educational attainment of all Scotland's young people is a vital issue, especially at a time when young people are often the recipients of a bad press—they are painted with the same brush when it comes to their contribution to civic life. It can be even worse for looked-after young people, who can feel demoralised by the stigma that is the result of a situation that is not of their making.

With public services under threat and the United Kingdom Government Welfare Reform Bill hitting vulnerable groups harder than others, we need to fight to protect the services that work for those groups. We also need to respond to their evolving needs, issues and aspirations in a more creative manner that nurtures the potential of all our young people and enables them to achieve their aspirations. Education and the principle of learning should be liberating rather than domesticating young people for their place in society.

If, as we so often hear, youth are our future, we must prioritise investment in their education for life and for employment.

If we are to improve the educational attainment of our looked-after children, reduce the number of exclusions that they experience and increase their attendance levels, we must involve them far more in the detail of the education and learning curriculum and ensure that the ethos of the learning environment nurtures a can-do attitude and a realisation of leadership qualities.

As I mentioned earlier, additional services are available to looked-after young people in Glasgow. We have heard from other members about

projects in their areas. A quality learning experience should not be dependent on a postcode lottery but should be funded, resourced and accessible to all young people.

Young people throughout Scotland—particularly those from disadvantaged groups—should all have the opportunity to seek further and higher education. I am aware of how important further education—in particular, community campuses—has been to disadvantaged young people in my community and throughout the country. The Scottish Government must protect local access to further education to provide much-needed facilities for disadvantaged young people to use.

Scotland's looked-after young people often face difficult circumstances and challenges through no fault of their own. For their sake, I hope that we can work together with them, as well as for them, to provide a better education and life now and in the future.

15:56

Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. The Education and Culture Committee is to be congratulated on focusing the Parliament on a matter of enduring concern: our collective failure as corporate parents to help many looked-after children and young people to overcome the barriers that prevent them from leading productive and fulfilling lives, the costs of which Joan McAlpine and Christine Grahame starkly exposed in their speeches.

It is helpful to focus on educational attainment as the key to opening the lock of material and emotional disadvantage from which that group of youngsters suffers. Why has the educational attainment of looked-after children not improved over the past 10, or even 20, years? The figures are stark: 90 per cent leave school at age 16 or under with few or no qualifications, and fewer than half of them are in positive destinations six months later.

I agree with the excellent analysis that is laid out in Children in Scotland's briefing for the debate. In essence, we need to get the learning environment right. For looked-after children, that will be a very hard nut to crack. For example, support for them in school has tended to be mobilised as crisis intervention when behaviour or performance becomes difficult for teachers to manage, rather than when children start to struggle.

There have been advances in recent years, such as the appointment of designated senior managers in every school to deal holistically with issues relating to looked-after children. Kevin Stewart highlighted that role, and I have no doubt that it has been helpful, particularly in taking

forward multi-agency approaches. However, the person who wears that hat will inevitably also have several others rather than being dedicated to that role. They will also not necessarily be the person to whom a looked-after child, knowing that they care for them, can turn for support.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): In my experience of working in schools, the people who often had the closest relationship with children—particularly looked-after children—were support assistants and school support staff. I am trying not to make a partisan point, but we must be careful because if we cut those staff, the knock-on effect on looked-after children will be most significant.

Adam Ingram: I agree with Neil Findlay's point about pupil support staff being an important resource within schools. I have also been impressed by counselling schemes, such as those provided by Place2Be—which Liam McArthur mentioned—which are also open to other children with additional support needs. Similarly, I am aware of mentoring schemes, such as those that were run by East Ayrshire Council in association with the local youth advocacy service and funded through the more choices, more chances programme.

Youngsters who benefited from the schemes said that they felt better about going to school because they had been able to talk through their problems and get them sorted out. Further development of such personalised services could make a significant contribution to improving attendance and preventing exclusion, both of which have a significant impact on eventual attainment levels.

Such development might be necessary, but it is not sufficient to compensate for the deficiencies in the home learning environment that underlie the disadvantage of looked-after children. In other words, what matters is the quality of parenting. All the research shows that a child's intellectual, social and emotional development is determined largely in the first three years of life. Almost by definition, looked-after children's early experiences have not only damaged that development but done so permanently. If we are to realise the ambition of closing the gap in attainment between looked-after children and their peers, we must take preventative action early enough to prevent developmental damage happening in the first place.

To my mind, that requires a twin-track approach to dealing with families at risk and should include the provision of significant support to vulnerable parents who are willing and able to put their child's interests first through pregnancy and beyond. Failing that, children must be removed from harmful and abusive situations quickly before irretrievable damage is done and a permanent

alternative home found for them as a matter of priority. I would favour a significant expansion in adoption as a means of providing permanence. I recognise that such actions will be seen in some quarters as too tough—even draconian—but if we are really serious about getting it right for every child, current procedures, which can be lengthy and drawn out, must be curtailed.

We can always do more to support looked-after children through the education system and I am confident that the work of the centre of excellence and the Scottish Government's looked-after children strategic implementation group will push the agenda forward. However, the fundamental challenge is to remove at source the disadvantage suffered by looked-after children, and I look forward to the work of the early years task force and the Scottish Government's commitment to delivering on its promises.

16:02

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):

First, I apologise for arriving slightly late in the chamber. I intended no discourtesy either to the Presiding Officers or to the chamber and will endeavour not to be late again.

I wish to make what I stress is not a partisan point about support staff, who have been mentioned a couple of times. Looked-after children have been failed by society for a very long time now, including during periods when there were huge numbers of support staff, and I caution members against simply equating more support staff with better outcomes for looked-after children. The situation is much more complex than that.

Neil Findlay: Will the member give way?

Mark McDonald: I understand that that was not the point that Mr Findlay was trying to make—

Neil Findlay: Will the member give way?

Mark McDonald: I am not taking an intervention at this point. As I said, I understand that that was not necessarily the point that the member was making. Nevertheless, I suggest that we ensure that such an equation is not what comes out of this debate.

At this point, I should declare an interest; like Kevin Stewart, I am a member of Aberdeen City Council. Indeed, as a result, I have learned the hard way that people who speak after Mr Stewart tend to find that all the good material has gone when they get up to make their speech. Luckily, I am flexible and will do my best to come up with some stuff for the committee.

Although, as the convener rightly said, the debate is about trying to find answers from members in the chamber, I think that he might well

get constructive suggestions instead. After all, the issue is too difficult for any of us to claim that we have some kind of silver bullet answer or range of answers to it.

We certainly need to consider the question of achievement versus attainment, because narrowing the focus to attainment might exclude those who are not academically inclined. I am not suggesting that there are not looked-after children who are academically inclined, but the figures seem to indicate that looking at achievement might be a way of broadening and improving looked-after children's experience of the education system. Focusing on activities other than purely academic ones might be beneficial for the children concerned and more widely.

Exclusions are worth looking at, too. I question whether exclusion is the appropriate approach to take, particularly with looked-after children. The figures make for fairly sober reading. Aberdeen City Council has a figure of 627 exclusions per 1,000 looked-after pupils, compared with a national figure of 365 per 1,000 looked-after pupils. The figure for Argyll and Bute Council is 417 and that for Dundee City Council is 525. One figure leaped out at me—that for South Ayrshire Council, where the number of looked-after children is 31 and the total number of exclusions of looked-after children is 28. South Ayrshire Council is the only local authority that I managed to find—I did not look at figures for every local authority—where the number of exclusions of looked-after children is lower than the total number of looked-after children. Crucially, South Ayrshire's figure for the number of exclusions per 1,000 looked-after pupils is 161, which is less than half the national level.

What is being done in South Ayrshire? Is a different approach being taken that is leading to those figures? The committee might want to consider looking at that in more detail. I do not have the answer before me, but South Ayrshire's figures leaped off the page as being different from and standing out against the national picture. A closer look at arrangements there might be beneficial.

Opportunities are also worth considering. Educational attainment or experience is one thing, but we need to consider what happens after that. Kevin Stewart quite rightly mentioned the family firm approach that is being taken in Aberdeen and the apprenticeships and internships that are being offered by businesses and the council itself. He was correct in what he said about positive discrimination. Given the negative experiences that looked-after children face throughout their childhood, being positive in giving them a helping hand is entirely justified, both in our role as corporate parents and generally, from a moral point of view.

Kevin Stewart: The point that I was trying to make was that although some see such action as positive discrimination, I do not see it as positive discrimination at all. The reality is that, if a member of our family was in that situation, we would do everything possible to get them a job. I think that as corporate parents, whether in the Parliament or in councils, of which some of us are still members, we should do the same thing that we would do for family members. Although some would call it positive discrimination, I would not label it as such.

Mark McDonald: I take that point entirely. I used the term “positive discrimination” to refer to the member’s point about the manner in which it had been used to him.

I do not know whether the committee has considered this, but I suggest that it should talk to the young people themselves. One of the most powerful and hard-hitting things that I experienced as an elected member was watching a talking-heads DVD that had been put together by the social work department at Aberdeen City Council. It featured children who were being looked after in a care setting, who gave their views on and experiences of the care setting in general, the corporate parenting that they received and their lives as a whole. It would be helpful to ask such children how they view the education system and what they see as their challenges. Talking to organisations that deal with looked-after young people is absolutely fine, but there is no substitute for first-person testimony. I actively encourage the committee to consider talking to a sample of looked-after children or former looked-after children about their experiences in order to inform its work.

16:09

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): Like other members, I value the opportunity that the debate provides to express views and highlight experiences, which I hope will in some way inform the committee’s report.

The challenge of enabling and supporting the best education for looked-after children and young adults who are in transition from being looked after is a great one. Many initiatives have attempted to grapple with the seemingly intractable nature of the challenges that looked-after children and young people face. In the honest and stark words of the convener, we have to admit that on the whole we have not achieved what we set out to achieve.

However, we all acknowledge that there is good practice. Many members gave examples, not least Kevin Stewart when he described what is happening in Aberdeen. The committee has taken

a great deal of valuable evidence, which has shaped the five key themes that inform the recommendations.

If they are to thrive, looked-after children must have the support and guidance that they need, in education and in the structure of their very lives. I am somewhat daunted by the task of shedding further light on the issue at this stage in the debate, but I will try to do so. The convener asked to hear about members’ experiences, and although I can give only one perspective, I hope that it is worth highlighting the positive ethos of a small unit for pupils who had been excluded from school, where I worked for four years.

The majority of teenagers in the unit were looked after. The educational team was able to offer continuity of appropriate educational experience, which generally matched the pupils’ needs, interests and increasing aspirations. Support from the psychological services was regular and frequent, for pupils and for teaching and other staff, who were helped to identify challenges and develop strategies. Such an approach has been endorsed to some extent by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Scotland, which called for “evidence-based therapeutic interventions” where necessary, especially in relation to attachment issues.

Some of the young people who attended the unit were able to articulate the importance that they attached to being listened to and respected. As Mark McDonald said, it is important that we listen to young people. Other members talked about the importance of recognising achievement as well as attainment in looked-after children and young people.

I am in no way advocating that looked-after children be educated in small, separate classes, away from their peers, but we must consider what lessons can be drawn from experience in the school in which I worked. We must acknowledge the role of the designated manager but, if the educational needs of our looked-after children are to be met, not just guidance teachers but all teachers and support staff must be equipped with an understanding of the challenges that such children face. The approach must continue to be developed as an essential part of initial teacher training and continuing professional development.

It is perhaps key that we do our best to ensure that as far as possible looked-after children are with the same named and appropriately-trained member of staff throughout their two stages of schooling—primary and secondary. It is essential that staff support and advice arrangements are not just in place at times of crisis but accessible on a regular and on-going basis.

At a more strategic level, of which I have some experience, there remain silos out there. When I was a teacher I attended a local authority interagency away day, which was also attended by social workers, the police, care workers, the voluntary sector and other people who had a significant role with looked-after children. We were presented with a challenging scenario to try to resolve and we were given roles that were different from our usual roles. It was disconcerting to learn how little some of us—including me—knew about how other professionals work and about the constraints that people face and the opportunities that they have in their professional lives. Sharing our experience was a positive exercise and I hope that we will reflect on the implications. The committee's evidence from HMIE highlighted the value of multi-agency working, which remains patchy.

I will conclude by talking about our post-care obligations as corporate parents. Needless to say, becoming an adult is a complex process for us all. Most of us managed it with the help of at least one parent, who topped up the cash now and then—perhaps sometimes in a rather immediate way—looked after us when we had a rotten cold, tucked us into bed and gave us a Christmas present that we hoped for or a silly stocking at the end of the bed. I hope that our parents were there for us when we needed them—for some of us, they are still there. Many children who leave care have not had such continuity of love and care. As corporate parents we must address how best we can set up an interlocking system of stability for such young people.

The support needs of students in colleges and universities have been highlighted by other speakers and also by NUS Scotland and the University of Strathclyde students association. Their comments are vital. We must also consider the needs of young people who have been looked after who are not in further or higher education, as they are perhaps the most intractable group in relation to our post-care obligation. We must help that group by ensuring that suitable training and continuing support are identified and maintained as they move, we hope, towards work.

I stress that the through thread—the continuity of support throughout a looked-after child's progress towards adulthood—is key. Resources are also essential—that was the fifth of the key points that Stewart Maxwell mentioned. We all hear of the budgetary challenges that we are facing. The challenges that we face as corporate parents are about not only cash, but how we can best arrange support. Both aspects must be considered with the utmost seriousness when the committee draws up its recommendations. We must ensure that meeting any demands on the public purse that arise from the

recommendations—whether they involve expenditure by local authorities or by the Government—is an absolute priority.

16:16

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I declare that I am a member of the City of Edinburgh Council's corporate parenting group.

This issue is surely one of the most important to be debated in the chamber, and I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute. If we are serious in our desire to ensure that there is genuine equity of opportunity for all, we must provide our looked-after young people with the ability to succeed in education and in life. However, we know that that is no small challenge, as the great divide in educational attainment between looked-after children and other school leavers testifies. We heard from other members that people who have been looked after are 60 times more likely to be imprisoned than to have achieved five or more standard grades at credit or better.

The challenge continues to grow. The number of children who require to be looked after continues to increase, and it is essential that resources are in place for those who need such care. That is clearly a challenge in the current financial climate, but it is one that we cannot afford not to meet. There are many reasons behind the growing number, but an increase in parental drug and alcohol misuse is among them, and we must continue to tackle that.

Having spent several years on the City of Edinburgh Council's corporate parenting group, I have experienced strong support across the parties for improving all outcomes for our looked-after young people, and the same strong support exists in the Parliament. HMIE reported in 2010 that awareness of corporate parenting among senior council staff and members had improved, and that is encouraging. It is essential that there is widespread understanding that all local authorities must have the same interest in the progress and attainment of looked-after children that a good parent has for their children, and that local councillors and officers must clearly demonstrate that commitment.

In his submission to the inquiry, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People told the Education and Culture Committee that it is worth noting what the Social Work Inspection Agency's report "Extraordinary Lives: Creating A Positive Future For Looked After Children and Young People In Scotland" stated:

"We have concluded that the single most important thing that will improve the future of Scotland's looked after children is for local authorities to focus on and improve their corporate parenting skills."

I welcome the evidence that that is happening. Corporate parenting groups are doing more. For example, they are involving elected members in meetings with staff from the national health service, the third sector and private foster care providers. Those meetings are educational and informative, although I agree with other members that hearing directly from young people themselves is invaluable. I attended a meeting that was organised by the young people in care council, which really brought those messages to life. We heard directly about the challenges that are faced by young people who have not experienced the secure and settled home life that we would wish for them.

The young people showed us a video entitled "Running Alone", which they had made and starred in. It highlighted quite starkly the challenges that they faced in leaving care and moving into flats on their own as 16-year-olds who had no stable routine to fall back on. The challenges mirrored those that they had faced throughout their young lives. They voiced fears. They were self-aware, and they were concerned that, without supportive adult voices telling them, probably for the umpteenth time, that it was time to get up, they simply would not have the self-discipline to get to the job interview, work, college or whatever the first appointment of the day was, to make that packed lunch, or to balance their tight budgets.

They lacked confidence, as they often had at school, to deal with problems as they arose. From the video, their loneliness was palpable and their need for support was clear. That need can be addressed, as witnesses such as the Scottish Parent Teacher Council suggested, by providing advocates for children and ensuring strong support for identifying lead professionals in our schools and ensuring that they receive the best training available. We also need to ensure that the support continues into throughcare and aftercare as the 16 to 19-year-olds make life-changing decisions on education and employment without the support that we would give our own children.

We all appreciate that patience, understanding, creativity and positivity are essential in building a child's sense of confidence and achievement, and we need to bear it in mind that the starting points for children in education are very different. However, we must always be as ambitious for our looked-after young people as we are for our own children. I welcome the committee's inquiry, which raises awareness of the complex challenges that looked-after young people face and emphasises the role that we as corporate parents must play. As the inquiry goes on I ask that it look at the different rates of pay for those fostering across the local authorities and at the difficulties that authorities have in attracting foster carers. I think

that Edinburgh sits midway on the scale of the 32 local authorities in that regard, but accommodation in Edinburgh is perhaps the most expensive in the country.

As I said, I welcome the inquiry and I hope that it leads to the positive results for our looked-after young people that we all wish to see.

16:21

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

Thank you, Presiding Officer, for giving me the opportunity to speak in the debate. I was lucky enough to hear the evidence in the Education and Culture Committee, which I was a member of until we had our reshuffle. I commend the convener and members of the committee because we approached the issue as a committee in a consensual and constructive way, which is exactly what an issue such as this deserves. I will miss the commitment of my colleagues on the Education and Culture Committee to issues such as this.

In Dundee today, 708 looked-after children are in the local authority's care. The average number of looked-after children in the care of local authorities across the country is 500, and there are 16,000 looked-after children in Scotland. Members will note that Dundee has well above the national average of children who are looked after by a local authority. The figure is proportionally even more above the national average when we consider that our council area has a small local authority population of 140,000 people, including 25,000 children.

When I was elected to the Parliament in May last year, 693 children were looked after in Dundee; 15 more children have been taken into care since then. There are no signs that the number will not continue to increase. I know that members across the chamber are sympathetic to the fact that we can talk about the statistics but, behind them, as Alison Johnstone clearly articulated, and behind each of the further 15 children who have been taken into care in Dundee, is a story of chaotic lives and empty bellies in the morning. The committee heard evidence of children who, if they leave for school in the morning, find dog faeces in the hall as they leave their homes. I know that all members in the chamber are alive to the tragedy that we are talking about.

The numbers of looked-after children in Dundee has led Barnardo's Scotland to issue an appeal this morning for more foster carers in Dundee, because it thinks that the situation has reached crisis point. Barnardo's highlighted the worrying fact that the number of children in care in Dundee has reached an all-time high. I take this

opportunity to pay tribute to the foster carers in Dundee, many of whom I know, for the time, commitment and love that they give to the children. I also commend the work that our workers in the city council do with the 708 children in their care.

Although Dundee City Council revised its budget to find money to pay for the support that the children require—as some speakers have acknowledged, providing that support is an expensive business—money is being taken away from other services, such as libraries and leisure, that could all have a preventative impact on those children's lives. Such services might not keep children out of care or prevent them from becoming looked-after children, but they could contribute to their quality of life. I know that there is agreement across this chamber—highlighted by the speeches of Joan McAlpine and Christine Grahame, which touched on the criminal justice system—that our ultimate focus must be preventative and that the best way in which to tackle poor attainment in looked-after children is to tackle the causes that lead them to be looked after in the first place.

As shadow minister for community safety, I say that that means tackling issues such as domestic violence and drug abuse, which are major contributory factors to the vulnerability of our children.

Christine Grahame: I advise the member also to consider alcohol abuse. That, not drug abuse, turned out to be the main problem of women who were in the 218 project.

Jenny Marra: I accept Christine Grahame's point that alcohol abuse is a major contributory factor. We need to consider all those issues in tandem.

I want to consider children who are looked after in the home. Speakers have recognised that they are one of the most challenging groups because it is difficult to deliver the correct interventions to them. According to Claire Burns, from CELCIS, from whom the committee heard evidence, raising the attainment of those children is the real challenge. Addressing the unique needs of that group is by no means a simple task, partly because the issue of attainment is linked to a range of circumstances, as we have discussed.

Within the school environment, there have been many useful suggestions from stakeholders about how attainment can be improved, and CELCIS has highlighted the link between attainment and attendance at school. Among children looked after in the home, attendance is lower than it is in any other category of looked-after children. To remedy that, it has been suggested that quality improvement officers should take a more rigorous

role in charting the school attendance of that group of children. CELCIS has also suggested that more data on attendance should be collected so that those children who are unable to complete a full timetable can adopt a pragmatic one that factors in evening activities that are designed to build self-esteem and resilience.

However, it is important to note that attainment stems first from that desire to learn, which some of us were lucky enough to be instilled with, and measures to promote that must be taken not only within the school environment. That will help children to achieve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): I ask the member to come to a conclusion.

Jenny Marra: I will, Presiding Officer. The increasing number of looked-after children calls for a greater focus on preventative action, and we must tackle the root causes that lead to children being looked after in the first instance.

16:28

Mary Scanlon: I welcome the tone and the constructive approach of all members in this debate. We have heard some startling figures, particularly from Joan McAlpine and Christine Grahame, who told us that 28 per cent of prisoners were in care as children. That is undoubtedly worthy of further investigation.

When Kevin Stewart highlighted the success of Aberdeen City Council in achieving a higher-than-average level of positive destinations, I looked up one of the papers that we have for today's debate, which contains relevant Government figures, and saw that 59 per cent of looked-after children achieve a positive initial destination, but that falls to 44 per cent for the follow-up destination. The number of all school leavers who find a positive initial destination is 87 per cent, and that figure falls by only 2 per cent for the follow-up destination. I hope that the committee agrees that that, too, is worthy of further consideration.

I commend Dennis Robertson on his straight-talking speech—no more excuses, no more blame; we must get it right for every child. I think that he summed up the sentiment of the debate in his speech.

There are other issues that have not been mentioned today. As part of the curriculum for excellence, every learner is entitled to personal support to enable them to gain as much as possible from the opportunities that the curriculum offers. That is good, but it brings me back to the point that I made in my opening speech. There is an entitlement to personal support, but is there a duty on local authorities to provide that support? What happens if the personal support that the care

plan identifies as being required is not given? Who is responsible, and what is the appeals mechanism?

Many worrying figures have been stated today. One of the worst and most shocking was the average exclusion rate, which is 45 per 1,000 children for all pupils, and eight times higher for looked-after children.

Another point that many members have highlighted is that the number of exclusions is four times greater for children who are placed in six or more placements in a year, in comparison with children who have had the stability of one placement. I appreciate that there is a shortage of foster carers, as the committee convener mentioned. The minister said that it was the Government's ambition for children to have just one placement. We need to understand why children are enduring so many placements, and look at what is being done to investigate why children are being shunted around with such a detrimental effect on their outcomes.

I want to raise the issue of mental health in early years. I appreciate that other members have mentioned it, but only last year I found out through freedom of information legislation that children in Tayside were waiting for a maximum of three and a half years for mental health diagnosis, care and support. Three and a half years—and we wonder why we have a problem.

In Highland, children can wait for a maximum of a year, and in Lanarkshire, Borders, Forth Valley and Greater Glasgow they can wait for up to six months. Research has confirmed that there is a window of opportunity to address poor mental health around the ages of two and three years. If that opportunity is missed, the consequence can be lifelong poor mental health. Unfortunately, our child and adolescent mental health services are not yet sufficiently geared up to identify issues and deliver early intervention to both children and parents.

I understand that the Governments of Wales and Northern Ireland have in place a national strategy for school counselling and its implementation, which is backed by ring-fenced funding in every school. As a member of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, I feel that we can learn much by comparing our actions with what is done in other jurisdictions around these islands. Has the committee gathered any evidence from other jurisdictions on things that perhaps work better?

I hope that the committee report will focus not only on the safety of children in care, but on ensuring that the factors that are associated with becoming looked after are addressed. That issue was well highlighted by Liam McArthur.

On a point that Adam Ingram raised in his excellent speech, there are more than 60,000 children in care throughout the United Kingdom, but there were only 3,000 adoptions last year. I welcome the UK Government's proposals that set out new minimum standards not only for the number of adoptions, but for what happens to children in the care system.

I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate, and I hope that we can look at other jurisdictions around these islands to share best practice.

16:34

Neil Bibby: A number of important issues have been raised in the debate, which I am sure will help the members of the Education and Culture Committee with their inquiry into the educational attainment levels of looked-after children. It has been an excellent debate and valuable points have been made by every member who has spoken. I apologise if I am unable to pick up on all of them.

It has been clear from all the evidence—and it has been backed up today—that our most vulnerable children and young people face a significant number of issues. As members have stated, poor educational attainment is not the only problem affecting those young people later in life. Emphasis must be placed on the importance of outcomes; that point was made by several members.

As Anne McTaggart said, looked-after young people are less likely to have employment opportunities and, as Liam McArthur said, they are more likely to have mental health issues. They are also more likely to have sexual health issues, to be homeless and to go to prison. Some important facts about that were cited by both Joan McAlpine and Christine Grahame, giving us a stark reminder that we need to do more on the issue.

The issue is becoming even more severe because the number of looked-after children has increased every year since 2001 as a result of what the ADSW has described as an

“epidemic rise in the numbers of children living with drug and alcohol misusing parents”.

Individual looked-after children face a complex range of issues; therefore, there needs to be a personalised response. All those issues cannot be fitted into a two-and-a-half-hour debate, which is why I welcome the Education and Culture Committee's inquiry.

Members have talked about early years intervention, and the minister talked about the Government's announcement of a change fund to support early years work, which can make a big

difference to vulnerable children. I cannot think of any better use of preventative spend than helping those children and their families at the earliest stage, hopefully preventing the children from entering the care system.

Parenting was mentioned by Hanzala Malik and other members. It was also raised by Children in Scotland, which stated in its evidence that children who have poor experience of parenting in their younger years are likely to repeat those mistakes later in life.

The positive parenting programme—triple P—is an international award-winning parenting education programme that has listened to and worked with thousands of parents and professionals throughout the world. It works for many families in different circumstances and with different problems. Whether they are the parents of a tantrum-throwing toddler or teachers who have to deal with truancy, triple P gives people useful ideas to help them to meet the challenges of raising children. The programme has been rolled out by Glasgow City Council education services to all parents of primary 1 and nursery children. Sessions are run regularly in libraries throughout Glasgow, providing parents with necessary information, tips and skills to practise with their children.

The importance of sharing best practice and working together is a theme that has run throughout the debate. Mary Scanlon made some important points about the need for consistency in approach throughout Scotland. Joan McAlpine made an interesting point about the plethora of policy initiatives and the various plans. That is an important issue that affects not just staff, but children who are expected to go to meeting after meeting and can sometimes feel overburdened and under pressure at the number of meetings that they need to attend. If improvements can be made in that respect, we should certainly consider them.

Alison Johnstone made an important point about raising awareness of the need for corporate parenting. The committee's convener asked for good examples from around the country—Kevin Stewart mentioned Aberdeen City Council and we have heard about a number of others. We can learn a great deal from the efforts of dedicated staff and charities throughout Scotland, including those at the Kibble Education and Care Centre in Paisley, in the region that I represent. The centre has been looking after children from throughout Scotland for nearly 150 years. The statistics show that 4.7 per cent of children who are looked after away from home achieve five or more standard grades. The great work that the Kibble centre is doing has resulted in around 10 per cent of the children there attaining those grades. However, I

know, from speaking to staff at the Kibble centre, that they are not complacent about that and want to improve that rate further, which is very encouraging.

With the sharing of best practice in mind, I welcome the expertise of organisations such as the Kibble centre being tapped into by local authorities so that it can benefit looked-after children in all our mainstream schools. I hope that the convener and the minister will reflect on that.

Many members—including Anne McTaggart, Hanzala Malik, Stewart Maxwell and Liam McArthur—mentioned the work that is being done by Glasgow City Council to help looked-after children. With around 10 per cent of Scotland's population and around 20 per cent of Scotland's looked-after children, Glasgow has a great deal of experience in helping to improve the life chances of looked-after children. Anne McTaggart mentioned the work of the CLASS programme.

Members have mentioned the need to support families, and we can learn a lot from the home start initiative, which has been run by the voluntary sector. Attendance and exclusion were also mentioned. It is not an either/or issue—dealing with both will be important in improving attainment.

I return to my earlier contribution by saying that we have a duty towards children whom it is determined have to be looked after by the authorities. Responsibility for the future wellbeing and achievement of those children falls on us as citizens and as corporate parents. We must not fail them any longer.

16:40

Aileen Campbell: In my new role as Minister for Children and Young People, I have been pleased to hear members' views in this important debate. As I outlined in opening the debate, it is the responsibility of us all, as corporate parents, to work together to support our looked-after children, young people and care leavers to become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens. I am greatly encouraged by the cross-party support for tackling this issue, and by hearing the examples of good practice from across the country. We would all agree that more needs to be done. In the words of the 2001 report,

"we can and must do better".

A number of points have been raised during the debate and I would like to take time to address some of them. Mary Scanlon noted the need to work in partnership—whether between the health authorities and the council, or within the council and across professions. Indeed, many members—Liam McArthur, Dennis Robertson and Claudia

Beamish—have spoken about the need for working in partnership, and I absolutely agree. In my role as Minister for Children and Young People—and, indeed across the Government—collaborative working, and the need to disrespect boundaries and place the child at the centre of all that we do, are fundamental to driving forward improvements. That is why we launched the corporate parenting national training programme. Change will also be driven by the new inspection regime that is being developed by the care inspectorate and which is based around children's experiences.

Many members have spoken about the need to be canny with additional strategies, and the Government is taking action, working with the looked-after children strategic implementation group and with CELCIS.

I welcome the comments from Joan McAlpine, Christine Grahame and others who linked the issue of looked-after children and young people with the issue of offending. In the previous session of Parliament, my work on what the children's commissioner termed the innocent victims of crime—meaning, the children of prisoners—has given me a huge interest in the subject. We need to break the cycle of being in care and then offending. That is why the Government is committed to intervening in the earliest years and to providing safe, stable, permanent and nurturing homes.

Christine Grahame asked whether CELCIS would work with academics and others to prevent young people in care from offending. The answer is yes—work is going on just now. I hope that that provides Christine Grahame with some assurance.

Jean Urquhart urged that we should listen to professionals. I assure her that that happens through CELCIS, LACSIG and others, as we try to drive forward good policy.

Anne McTaggart, Claudia Beamish and Alison Johnstone shared their valuable professional experience, adding a great deal to the debate. Anne McTaggart made a passionate case for ensuring that looked-after children and young people are not forgotten in welfare reforms. The point was well made.

Adam Ingram spoke about the importance of parenting and of the need to close the gap in attainment between looked-after young people and other young people. Correctly, he noted the need to act early, before permanent damage is done. He noted the need for speed in decisions on permanence. The Scottish Government is committed to improving the care journey for children, and to creating a national parenting strategy. I thank Adam Ingram very much for his points.

Hanzala Malik made specific points about the need to support Punjabi-speaking families and service users, and about issues surrounding Punjabi language and the SQA. My colleague Alasdair Allan has said that he will speak to the member to see what can be done.

Neil Bibby, Neil Findlay, Hanzala Malik and others made good points about the excellent work of behavioural support staff. The 2011 figures that I have show a slight increase and I commend the local authorities that are doing everything to support the important work that behavioural support staff do.

Kevin Stewart, Mark McDonald and Neil Bibby spoke about innovative practice and positive stories that surround the issue, and highlighted the good work that is being done in their local areas. We need to hear such news, and the committee will appreciate the opportunity that the debate has given it to add it into its report. When we hear positive stories, we should learn from them and ensure that good outcomes are passed on and that we learn from best practice.

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): On the point about learning from best practice, some years ago I was fortunate enough to go from the Parliament on a study trip to Finland with colleagues from all parties. We learned about the high educational attainment of looked-after children in Finland. Is our Government looking elsewhere in Europe for good models for achieving our desired outcomes?

Aileen Campbell: As the member said, the Government should always learn from other countries and not just look for good examples within our boundaries. If there are good models being used in Finland, committee members will appreciate Linda Fabiani raising that matter with them and they will make it part of their report. I will certainly ensure that the Government learns from such models.

Jenny Marra and Stewart Maxwell spoke about looked-after children at home. Because outcomes are so poor for that cohort, corporate parents need to focus more effort on keeping such children engaged in school and health services. We have commissioned CELCIS to undertake a baseline study of the circumstances of children who are looked after at home.

Through GIRFEC, curriculum for excellence, additional support for learning and more choices, more chances, we will continue to ensure that the needs of looked-after children, young people and care leavers are embedded in wider work to improve outcomes. As a result of our additional support for learning legislation, all looked-after children and young people are automatically deemed to be in need of additional support in

school unless the local authority specifically determines that they do not need it.

Mary Scanlon: I am listening carefully to the minister. How will she ensure that checks and balances are in the system to ensure that looked-after children get more and do better than they are getting and doing at the moment?

Aileen Campbell: We have improved data collection and will ensure that the inspectorate that I mentioned earlier, which is for looking at the way in which the initiatives and strategies happen, will ensure that children are at the heart of all that we do and that improvement is driven forward. I hope that that reassures Mary Scanlon. Many members have raised the fact that there are many different strategies out there and that it is necessary to piece them together to get clarity. I am sure that we can all work together to ensure that that happens, and I make that commitment to Mary Scanlon.

We will drive forward the implementation of national policy and address the major barriers that are faced by practitioners by concentrating on three priority areas: how to raise attainment and measure the record of achievement; how to assist the children's workforce to provide educational support; and how to ensure that the educational needs of looked-after children are reflected in the inspection evaluation process. As we know, all that cannot be done in isolation. I have also outlined plans to support at an early stage families who are in difficulty, to improve permanent and care planning arrangements, and to improve support for corporate parents.

I hope that members are reassured that we are committed to tackling the poor educational attainment of this vulnerable group and to working together across political parties to do better by all Scotland's looked-after children.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Liz Smith will wind up the debate on behalf of the committee. You have 10 minutes.

16:49

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I was not expecting this role, but I have had a pleasant afternoon listening to remarkable speeches, some of which have been remarkable because they were so informed.

As we debated in the chamber back in October, and as we discussed in committee throughout November and December, few issues are more important than how we raise attainment among young people. As the convener rightly said at the beginning of the debate, when it comes to attainment levels of looked-after children, no one can really feel anything other than shame over

Scotland's record for far too many of those young people.

Like the convener and many colleagues from all across the chamber who have spoken, I do not pretend in any way that the issue is easy, particularly as there has been so much good will for many years in trying to deal with the problem. There has been an absence of belligerent policy differences, by which we are sometimes characterised in the chamber. I think that we all feel a little concerned and perhaps a little bit embarrassed that we have tried to do things several times and have been very good at coming up with aims and objectives but have not, for one reason or another, managed to get the results that we would like.

Christine Grahame: The debate was proposed so that we could come forward with ideas. Members around the chamber have mentioned programmes that are working in their constituencies and regions. The committee should consider holding a symposium, conference or round-table discussion—members can call it what they like. Members can be asked for examples from their areas and constituencies and people can be asked to come along who are involved in early intervention with their budgets and it can be seen whether that works. I do not think that that has been done. The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations could get involved. That is a practical example. I have heard many very good examples. People should be got together to find out what works and to come up with practical solutions.

Liz Smith: When she spoke earlier, Christine Grahame gave us an example from Peebles, and examples from Aberdeen were also given. She is absolutely right that it is important that the committee take on board examples of best practice, as there is no doubt that we get the best ideas from best practice.

Evidence that the committee took—this came through in Liam McArthur's and Dennis Robertson's speeches and Claire Burns of CELCIS certainly put it to us—suggests that very much better co-ordination of the services that are involved in helping youngsters is the key to our making progress. We were particularly struck by Claire Burns's comments on there being a need for teachers, social workers, healthcare professionals and welfare officers to be much more aware not just of the work that they do—Claudia Beamish made that point—but of their responsibilities, and for their being at one in putting in place the appropriate assistance for children. The principles that underpin GIRFEC—particularly in the Highland Council area, to which Mary Scanlon referred, and which has led the way in much of this—are unquestionably the right

ones, but time and again we have heard that they are not being applied consistently.

Kevin Stewart: GIRFEC training is still being carried out in silos in certain parts of the country, which has been detrimental across the board. Does Liz Smith believe that GIRFEC training should be carried out across the professions and that elected members should be involved in it so that they know what they are doing when it comes to creating a new policy?

Liz Smith: Kevin Stewart has made an important point, which I think was echoed in Graham Donaldson's approach in his recent work. We will get much better results for children the more we learn about one another's roles and the better we can co-ordinate. The member has made a very good point.

The committee is conscious that there is sometimes confusion and a bit of inefficiency in the care of individual children. We should be clear that that is by no means anyone's intention, but there is sometimes a problem with the system. There is a message for all of us from witnesses: some of the legislation may be seen to be a little contradictory and things work against one another. We are a little uncertain about how much evidence on that exists, so we need—I think that the convener of the committee would agree and I know that my colleagues on the committee would agree—to investigate the matter to assess how much of a problem it is.

The paramount issue of trust among looked-after children has come through in the debate. Children fare better when they trust the individuals with whom they deal, and they will trust them if they feel that their circumstances are secure and that they will get help in any circumstance in which they need it. That is why permanence is important and why the earliest opportunities need to be addressed. I have mentioned in Parliament several times that the early years strategy is working extremely well, although there is still work to be done. Adam Ingram's comments and work in the area have been significant. We cannot get away from the fact that the early years agenda is vital in addressing issues of attainment not just for looked-after children, but across the board. We need to ensure that that comes through in all our institutions and local authorities.

The committee was struck by comments that the central focus must be on outcomes, rather than on how we diagnose problems in the first instance; it has come through in some members' speeches that we must think more about outcomes than about diagnostic techniques. We are good at telling ourselves what is wrong, but we are perhaps a little less good at putting it right.

Throughout my time in Parliament, I have been struck by the compelling evidence that makes it clear to us all how important the early stages of development can be not just in school, but at home. We must understand that, when we talk about the early years, we are talking not only about the early stages of a child's life after birth, but about pre-birth situations. Members have talked about a parenting strategy and the circumstances in homes that we must address in order to help adults or young carers who are trying to assist looked-after children. We must help those people to address the difficulties and challenges that they face.

On behalf of the committee, I point out that we are conscious that we have tried something different in our approach. As yet, we have not produced a report or anything other than a mass of material. Our intention is to allow members from throughout the Parliament to input their ideas and experience—in some cases, their professional experience—and to go back to challenge some of the witnesses who have given us evidence, and to bring all that together. I again thank everybody who has contributed to the debate and I pay tribute to the committee convener and my colleagues on the committee. We still have a great deal of work to do, but everybody is 100 per cent behind that.

Business Motion

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-01676, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme. I call Bruce Crawford to move the motion.

16:59

The Cabinet Secretary for Parliamentary Business and Government Strategy (Bruce Crawford): It will give me particular pleasure to move the business motion on this first occasion in the new year. Members will see that motion S4M-01676, which is in my name, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, covers business for Wednesday 18 January 2012 and Thursday 19 January 2012, and that we have a full programme of business for Parliament to discuss, including on 25 January and 26 January.

I think that will do nicely, Presiding Officer.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 18 January 2012

2.30 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Ministerial Statement: Scottish Ambulance Service Rest Breaks
followed by Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee Debate: Common Agricultural Policy
followed by Business Motion
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 19 January 2012

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Government Debate: Local Government Elections 2012
 11.40 am General Question Time
 12.00 pm First Minister's Question Time
 2.15 pm Themed Question Time
 Culture and External Affairs;
 Infrastructure and Capital Investment
 2.55 pm Scottish Government Debate: Cities Strategy
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 25 January 2012

2.30 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motion
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 26 January 2012

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Government Business
 11.40 am General Question Time
 12.00 pm First Minister's Question Time
 2.15 pm Themed Question Time
 Education and Lifelong Learning
 2.55 pm Scottish Government Business
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

The Presiding Officer: I thank the cabinet secretary for that full explanation. No member has asked to speak against the motion, so I will put the question to the chamber.

The question is, that motion S4M-1676, in the name of Bruce Crawford, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business.

The question is, that motion S4M-1667, in the name of Stewart Maxwell, on the Education and Culture Committee inquiry into the educational attainment of looked-after children, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes that the Education and Culture Committee is undertaking an inquiry into the educational attainment of looked-after children and that, in order to inform its final report, the committee would welcome the views of all members on the key themes that have emerged in evidence.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time; we now move on to members' business. I ask members who are leaving the chamber to do so quickly and quietly.

Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S4M-1542, in the name of Annabel Goldie, on the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates the Kirkintilloch-based Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire; understands that the centre provides a central point for volunteering throughout East Dunbartonshire and that it aims to encourage and support local people who wish to offer their services to help others in their community; recognises the Volunteer Champions Project, a school-based initiative that promotes volunteering to teenagers; believes that, by volunteering, local young people are showing dedication and clearly have a social conscience; applauds the befriending service, which pairs a volunteer with an isolated adult, providing what it considers to be a vital source of friendship, assistance and company that reflects an admirable model of being a good neighbour, and commends what it sees as the excellent contribution that this organisation and the voluntary sector make to the community.

17:01

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): I am pleased that my motion on the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire has been selected for members' business this evening. I thank the MSPs who have supported it, and I particularly appreciate the cross-party support. That reflects the wide appreciation by MSPs across the chamber of the vital role that the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire and many other local organisations throughout Scotland play in our communities.

In November last year, I was privileged to visit the centre in Kirkintilloch, to meet staff and to learn about the excellent work that the centre does. I know that members across the chamber are diligent in making visits, but I have to say that when I emerged from that one I said to my researcher, "What an uplifting experience!" It was like drinking a glass of champagne.

The centre provides a central point for volunteering throughout East Dunbartonshire. It aims to support and encourage local people to offer their services to help others in their community—it is the focal point where people are encouraged, enabled and have the opportunity to volunteer.

When I stepped through the door, the enthusiasm and passion were tangible. That is down to the positive can-do approach reflected by all the staff, not least Paul O'Kane and Elaine, with whom I spent most time. Some of the staff are with

us in the public gallery, and I welcome them to the debate.

Those of us who were privileged to listen to Paul earlier today during time for reflection saw that passion and enthusiasm at first hand. I thought that he nailed it when he posed the question: what would happen if we woke up one morning to find that there were no volunteers? I think that there would be a Scotland full of voids and black holes, with thousands of lonely, vulnerable and unsupported people. No Government minister or local authority leader of any political hue could fill that void.

Volunteering is unique. It is the antithesis of selfishness. It is basically the implementation in people's own time and without remuneration of the enduring principles of people helping their neighbour and doing what they can to help others, not because they have to but because they want to. Those principles are all too often pushed aside. We are all guilty of that—usually not intentionally but simply because other pressures in life eat into our time and compete for our attention.

That is why the East Dunbartonshire centre is so important. It reminds us of the need to volunteer, to help and to remember others around us. It also co-ordinates those who want to volunteer, and of course it plays a vital role in facilitating how to volunteer.

However, that is only part of the story, because volunteering involves a symbiotic relationship—it is an exchange. It brings benefits not only to the recipient but to the volunteer. Indeed, among the reasons the volunteer Scotland website lists for why people should volunteer is because it feels good and because there will be

“No More Billy/Mary Nae Mates”.

However, there are other benefits for the volunteer. Volunteering can be a very social activity and can help people to make new contacts and meet new friends. It can provide new skills and experience. According to the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire, just over 50 per cent of the people who go to volunteer centres are on jobseekers allowance or incapacity benefit. Volunteering is a recognised pathway to personal development, learning and employment. Importantly, it can be immensely satisfying and hugely enjoyable.

On my visit to the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire I was particularly interested to hear about the specific projects that it runs. Two in particular stood out for me: the befriending service, which for me represents the essence of what a volunteer's presence can do; and the volunteer champions project, which endeavours to promote and encourage volunteering among our youngsters.

The befriending service was first introduced by the centre more than 11 years ago. Befriending is a supported relationship between two people. It is usually face to face but it can be by telephone, letter or e-mail. The service pairs a volunteer with an isolated adult, and there have been approximately 300 successful matches. The befriending relationship is initiated, supported and monitored by volunteer centre befriending service staff. The project aims to make a difference to the quality of life of people who experience social isolation due to ageing, disability or other changes in their circumstances. It provides a vital source of friendship, assistance and company. How marvellous and, like so many good things, how simple.

The volunteer champions youth volunteering project was developed by the volunteer centre in partnership with Turnbull high school in Bishopbriggs. Volunteer champions receive training from the centre so that they can promote a volunteering culture in their school and local community. In phase 1, the centre recruited 16 volunteer champions, who successfully completed their training in Turnbull high school and went on to promote volunteering and volunteering awards within the school environment. A volunteering hub is now being established in the school to assist the promotion of volunteering. The champions are fully involved in the project's development and are encouraged to take ownership of the programme. I think that that is fantastic.

The champions learn many new skills. They learn how to produce confident and motivating presentations, set up a volunteer stand at public events, work better in a team, overcome nerves and extend their knowledge of volunteering. When I visited I was delighted to meet Luisa, who runs the volunteer champions project. I also met Rachel, a volunteer champion and former Turnbull high school pupil. Both girls have clearly benefited from being involved with volunteering from a young age and both are a credit to the centre and to themselves. All those young people are a superbly positive advertisement for their local area.

What, then, is the positive message from the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire? First, although we are often told in the media that community spirit is dead and that everyone is busy or out for themselves, I can tell members that community spirit is in fact very much alive and kicking in East Dunbartonshire and Scotland. It was also clear to me that volunteering is cool. Our youngsters want that opportunity.

I congratulate the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire and its dedicated staff on the tremendous success of what they do and thank them for being such an inspiration to everyone

else. I am glad that Parliament has been able to show support for their efforts this evening.

17:09

Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I thank Annabel Goldie for securing the debate. I am delighted to take part in the debate and to highlight the work of the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire, which is in my constituency. As Annabel Goldie outlined, what a team we have there in the volunteer centre. Annabel referred to Paul O’Kane’s contribution at time for reflection. As she mentioned, some of the centre’s staff, including Luisa and Carol, are in the public gallery this evening.

My first contact with the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire was back in 1999, when I was a regional MSP for the West of Scotland, but my contact has continued since then. When I worked with East Dunbartonshire CVS in 2004, I worked with the volunteer centre and, as a fellow professional, learned about the work that it did.

I hope that, by now, I have become friends with the staff at the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire. Like Annabel Goldie, I love to go to the office. She likened it to a glass of champagne, and she is right: the staff and the office are always fizzing and sparkling. The people there are full of great enthusiasm.

I was delighted to be able to go and present a cheque for £50 towards the centre’s funds a few weeks ago. Many MSPs do market research for companies. They offer to pay us, but I always prefer—as I am sure most members do—to give the money to a local worthy cause. There cannot be a cause much more worthy than our volunteer centre.

I call them friends also because of what happened at the riding of the Parliament on 1 July. As I stood on the High Street watching the crowds go by, the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire representatives proudly came by behind their banner as part of the riding. I could not help myself: I jumped in and joined them behind the banner. What fun we had that day. It culminated in photos with the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth, who is here to reply to the debate. We had a great time.

Why is it important that we talk about volunteers and volunteering in the Parliament? Annabel Goldie talked about what volunteers say they get out of volunteering. That is true, but I am glad that the debate gives us the opportunity to say thank you back to volunteers for what they give to local communities. In thanking all our volunteers, I extend my thanks to the staff at the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire.

The volunteer centre is one of only five partner organisations in the third phase of the Scottish Parliament’s community partnership project. At the end of this month and into February, the centre will host a stall in the Parliament. I hope that as many MSPs as possible will take the time to stop by and see the work that it does.

I am glad that Annabel Goldie highlighted the volunteer champions work that we are doing in schools. It is the most fantastic thing. Having been a volunteer in my own day and having volunteered with young people, I think that it is important that we now work to encourage young people to come on board as volunteers.

Annabel Goldie also mentioned the work in Turnbull high school. Luisa has now taken that into Bishopbriggs academy, where the number of pupils who asked to work with the volunteer champions project meant that it was oversubscribed. That is largely down to—no, all down to—Luisa’s enthusiasm and the support that she gives the young people in their work.

Annabel Goldie also mentioned befriending. Volunteering continues for a long time. One of my friends, Sandra Renwick, began as one of the befrienders in Kirkintilloch, moved to Skye and is still befriending people in Kirkintilloch by phone from Skye. That shows how important volunteering becomes to people.

I thank Annabel Goldie for bringing the debate to the Parliament and I especially thank all volunteers and all those who work in the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire.

17:13

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I am delighted to have the opportunity to pay tribute to the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire and I welcome Annabel Goldie’s motion, which rightly recognises some of the organisation’s outstanding work in encouraging and enabling volunteering.

Volunteering makes a huge difference to individuals and communities and can be hugely rewarding for volunteers. It often provides a pathway to personal development, learning and employment. Therefore, it is crucial that we encourage and develop volunteering, particularly among young people, as well as recognise and assist those organisations that already do that.

I am aware that the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire’s undertakings are wide ranging. Its activities include recruiting volunteers and matching them to suitable organisations; assisting in the development of new volunteering opportunities, policies and procedures; offering general advice on volunteering; and providing

information on training opportunities for volunteers and individuals who work with volunteers.

I know that the centre's staff have a number of positive aims and initiatives for East Dunbartonshire, but I will start by paying particular attention to the excellent volunteer champions project, mentioned by both Annabel Goldie and Fiona McLeod, which works with young people in high schools throughout East Dunbartonshire. The project creates a volunteering environment in schools and trains a number of young people to be champions for volunteering, encouraging their peers to volunteer inside and outside of school, and its aims include improving and increasing the promotion of volunteering within the school environment; empowering young people through volunteering; developing a volunteering culture within the learning environment; promoting award schemes for volunteering; and establishing an East Dunbartonshire volunteer champions network.

I know from speaking to Paul O'Kane, the centre's development officer, just what impact the project has already had in East Dunbartonshire. In its first phase, 16 volunteer champions were recruited, completed their training at Turnbull high school and went on to promote volunteering within the school environment. Many of the first 16 have also been trained in facilitation and are now leading sessions in the new volunteer champions training programme. Such training and responsibility provide young people with fantastic experience that they can take forward; increase confidence; develop leadership and communication skills; improve CVs; and provide a genuine boost to young people aiming to access further education or find employment. The centre's aim of establishing a volunteer champions programme in all East Dunbartonshire secondary schools should be welcomed, and I hope that this type of project will soon be replicated in other parts of the country. It is vital that the Scottish Government recognises the importance of volunteering in all educational establishments, and I hope that consideration will be given to how we can improve volunteering among our young people.

As I have said, the volunteer champions project is only one of the centre's many positive initiatives. I want to briefly mention the successful befriending service, also mentioned by Annabel Goldie, which pairs a trained volunteer with an isolated adult. The pair are in regular contact for an agreed period of time and engage in social activities usually enjoyable to both. The befriending relationship, which is initiated, supported and monitored by the centre's befriending staff, aims to make a difference to the quality of life of people experiencing social isolation due to ageing, disability or other changes in their circumstances

and hundreds of people have benefited from the service since it was introduced by the centre more than 11 years ago.

None of these excellent projects and services would be possible without the commitment, hard work and creativity of the centre's excellent staff and I am sure that we in the chamber can unite in placing on record our appreciation not only for their work but for the efforts of all those who have participated in volunteering initiatives in East Dunbartonshire, which continues to lead the way in volunteering in Scotland.

I have to admit that I have yet to visit the centre—I have not found time to do so in the past six months—but I met its staff and volunteers at the opening of Parliament in July. Their dedication was an inspiration and they provide a great example of the good work that such centres carry out.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have a treat in store for you, then, Mr Bibby. I call the cabinet secretary to close the debate.

17:18

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I thank members for their speeches and congratulate Annabel Goldie on securing the debate. When I saw that her motion had been selected, I had a very happy recollection of being hijacked for a photograph on the opening day of Parliament and the enthusiasm and verve of the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire staff, which both Annabel Goldie and Fiona McLeod have described, were pretty obvious to me. It was a great encounter and I say to Mr Bibby that, given the enthusiasm that was on display on the Parliament's opening day, I cannot imagine that he will escape a visit to the centre for much longer.

The debate provides an important opportunity to record the appreciation of members of the Parliament for the work that has been done in the Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire. Many of us will have had experiences of the work that is done around the country in the areas that we represent. In my capacity as the minister responsible for the voluntary sector in Scotland, I have had the privilege of experiencing the tremendous contribution that volunteer centres and volunteers make in a variety of areas of our national life. I know that I speak for all members when I record our appreciation for the work that volunteers do and the contribution that they make to the fabric and the quality of life of those around us in our communities.

It is easy to say so, but the state could never replace the functions that are performed and the contribution that is made by volunteers, nor should

it try to do so. The contribution that they make is motivated by a regard and a respect for other citizens and members of our community that are self-motivating and self-expressed. They make an enormous contribution to the quality of life of all of us in communities in Scotland.

The Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire is one of the two partners in the East Dunbartonshire third sector interface, which is one of the 32 third sector interfaces across Scotland that the Scottish Government supports to deliver four key functions: to assist in volunteering development; to support and develop a strong third sector; to develop social enterprise; and to build the third sector's relationship with community planning.

The words that I have just expressed might include more than a little jargon—I see that Mr Carlaw, who is always a man to keep a close eye on my jargon, is watching me. The purpose of the interfaces is to ensure that one of the objectives that I have set for the work of the public sector in Scotland—that it should pay close regard to involving the third sector in the design of public services and public interventions at local level—is met. The interface model is designed to do exactly that. As part of its wider public service reform agenda, the Government has placed a clear emphasis on giving the third sector a growing role in the delivery of public services. The Government is persuaded by the fact that, in many of our communities, we see the third sector making an enormous contribution in reaching individuals in our society whom public services often find it challenging to reach and to support as effectively as they should.

The Government's approach to public sector reform, which involves a strong role for the third sector, prioritises prevention and the reduction of inequalities; brings organisations together at local level to deliver better outcomes; provides greater investment in the people who deliver services; and improves the performance of public services in meeting the aspirations of people at local level. The Government is equipping the third sector to make a significant contribution to that through its support for and engagement with national organisations and local networks. It is supporting organisations to participate in some of the design work on public services that the third sector would find it challenging to participate in without Government support, and it is encouraging a shift towards the development of more social enterprise activity. Among the great things that are happening in Scotland today are the burgeoning level of social enterprise activity and the development of new finance models to encourage the delivery of alternative models and to ensure that third sector organisations are at the heart of public service delivery.

Many aspects of the role of volunteers are recognised in the Government's programmes. Personal development and employability skills are some of the attributes that can emerge from some of the volunteering programmes over which the Government presides. One of those is the Scottish Government's MV awards scheme, which provides opportunities for young people between the ages of 16 and 25 to take part in voluntary work in their community. The scheme recognises the contribution that young people have made through the award of certificates for 50, 100 or 200 hours of volunteering.

As Ms Goldie recounted in relation to the volunteer champions project that has developed in East Dunbartonshire, we all know that volunteering can help young people to become successful and effective learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens. Ms Goldie, Mr Bibby and Fiona McLeod acknowledged the significance of young people's involvement in volunteering, which is of particular note.

On the wider role of volunteering in our society, the European year of volunteering in 2011 was significant. Our programme for the year focused on participation and celebration and included a volunteering and learning conference, at which delegates from across Europe shared their experiences. A national campaign was launched to raise the profile of volunteering and get more people in Scotland involved.

I am keen to maintain the momentum that has been generated and to ensure that the European year of volunteering has a strong and powerful legacy in our community. To demonstrate our ongoing commitment to volunteering, and to bring our work programme on the European year of volunteering to a close, the Scottish Government will adopt the principles that are laid down in the universal declaration on volunteering. That is in keeping with our view that the Government's approach should be to facilitate volunteering opportunities for as many people as possible of all ages and from all backgrounds, using a wide range of providers.

I assure the Parliament that although the European year of volunteering has ended, our volunteering support and our journey to support volunteering will be maintained. I take a close interest in the volunteering agenda and the Government will continue to work closely with its partners to recognise more actively the benefits of volunteering as we plan for policy delivery and plan to boost outcomes in our community.

The debate has highlighted the benefits of volunteering and the valuable contribution that Volunteer Centre East Dunbartonshire makes to the local community. I am certain that the centre's important work will be invigorated by the powerful

commendation that it was given in Ms Goldie's motion and the cross-party support that has been expressed. I look forward to hearing about more of the work as we continue to work closely with the centre, as we do with interface organisations in every part of our country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I close our first meeting of the Parliament in 2012.

Meeting closed at 17:27.

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